

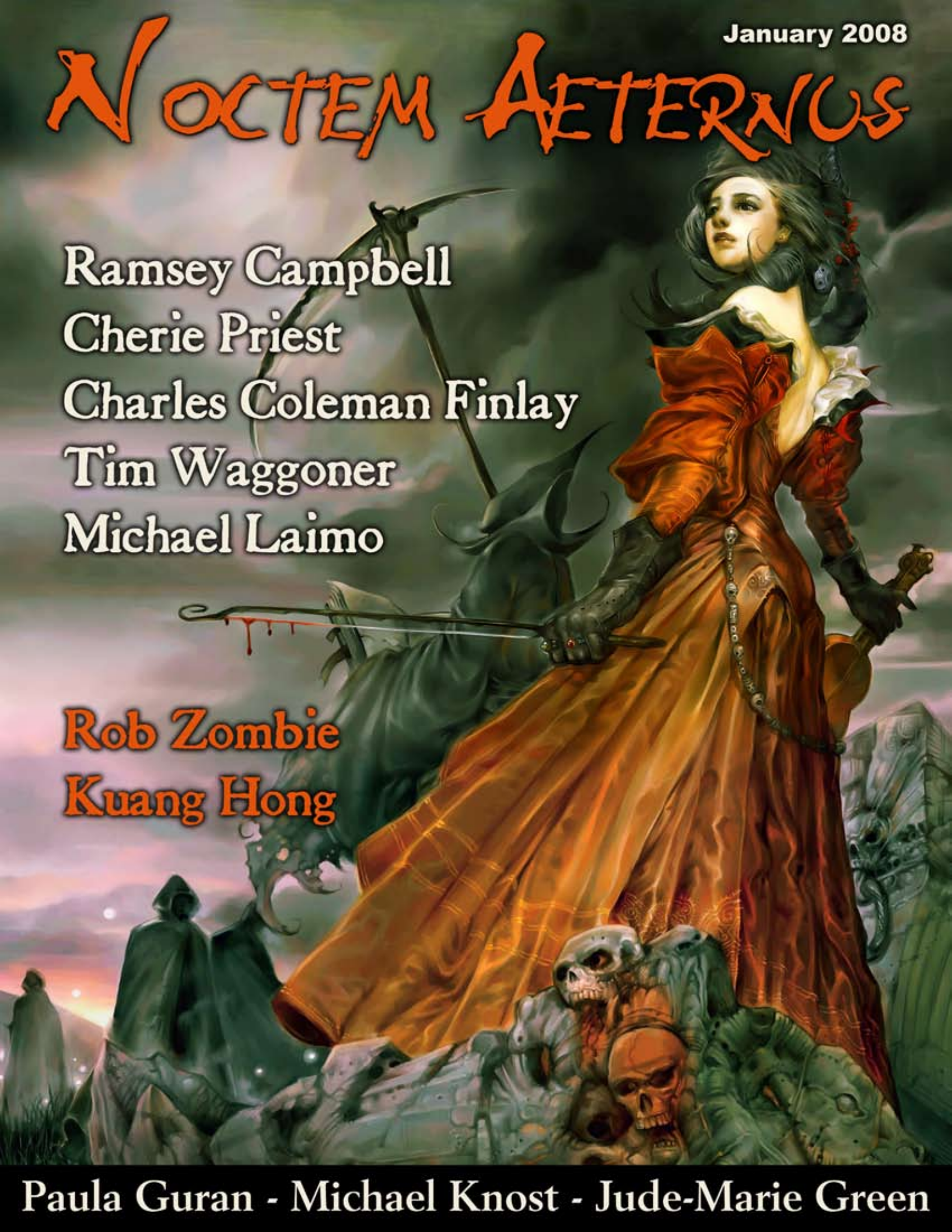
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NOCTEM AETERNUS

Ramsey Campbell
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IS SPECULATIVE FICTION AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

by Michael Knost

The year was 1978. I was in the fifth grade -- God only knows how I'd made it that far. I hated school. I hated learning. I especially hated reading.

One day, Bill Marino, one of the few teachers who cared enough to reach out to me during that difficult time, handed me something that changed my life forever.

Childhood's End -- that's what he gave me. Written by Arthur C. Clarke in 1953, this book was the catalyst to my own childhood's end.

I examined the yellowing paperback and frowned.

"You want me to do a book report, don't you?" He told me he only wanted my opinion of the book and that I would be free from all homework while reading it.

I discovered a new world that day -- not the evolutionary Earth Arthur C. Clarke so aptly

described, but the amazing world inside my own head.

Since that discovery, no movie has been able to reproduce the images or sounds a good book could evoke. There is no comparison between the two-dimensional experience of a television or movie screen and the I-swear-to-God-I-can-actually-smell-the-rocket-fuel experience while reading.

I devoured Childhood's End that night, unable to set it aside for a moment. I enjoyed the warmth of the sun on my skin and breathed in the aromas of that brief utopian society. I sat, slack-jawed and terrified

"Since that discovery, no movie has been able to reproduce the images or sounds a good book could evoke. There is no comparison between the two-dimensional experience of a television or movie screen and the I-swear-to-God-I-can-actually-smell-the-rocket-fuel experience while reading."

upon seeing -- with my very own mind -- the Overlords and the demonic features they embodied. And alongside the story's protagonist, I witnessed the coming end of the only world I ever knew.

When I returned the book the next day, Mr. Marino

placed it in a box of other science fiction classics and told me they were mine to keep.

I now realize all my accomplishments in life -- careers, wealth, and awards -- are a direct result of my addiction to literature.

I thought of Bill Marino and the box of science fiction classics while reading Connie Willis' recent WorldCon Guest of Honor speech. Connie's words moved me to tears as she and I obviously share the same passion and praise for the written word.

This is the reason I wanted to write this article.

We see new reports every day from sources tracking America's decline in reading, and the results are staggering. From literature, books, newspapers, magazines, and even webzines, circulation and readership contin-

ue to drop with each new day.

Literary reading is in dramatic decline with fewer than half of American adults now reading literature, according to a National Endowment for the Arts survey released in June 2004. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in

America reports drops in all groups studied, with the steepest rate of decline -- 28 percent -- occurring in the youngest age groups.

Findings in this survey revealed:

- The decline in literary reading parallels a decline in total book reading.
- The ten-year rate of decline has accelerated from -5 percent to -14 percent since 1992.
- The decline is in every category surveyed: gender, race, religion, education, income, and age.
- The decline in reading correlates with increased participation in various electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.

Because of the decrease in reading, we are obviously seeing falling numbers in book sales as well.

USA Today ran an AP story in May 2005 that focused on the decline in book sales. Facts from this article came from a report issued by the Book Industry Study Group, a nonprofit research organization. The report stated that the publishing industry continues to put out more books than the public is prepared to buy.

In fact, the number of books sold dropped by nearly 44 million between 2003 and 2004. The Book Industry Study Group reported estimated sales of 2.295 billion books in 2004, compared to 2.339 billion the previous year. The industry found a way to survive, how-

ever, as higher prices enabled net revenues to increase 2.8%, to \$28.6 billion.

"People are reading less, so what you're seeing is the same phenomenon that has hit magazines and newspapers, a massive shift toward home video, DVD, Internet and cable," said Albert N. Greco, an industry consultant and professor of business at the graduate school of Fordham University.

After considering all this information, I wondered how this decline in reading will ultimately affect niche markets like science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Sales and readership for these fields have followed the national trends with each year. There are some authors in science fiction, fantasy and horror who transcend genres, but more

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—Robert Dunbar, author of *THE PINES & THE SHORE*

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often than not only go as far as his or her respective niche markets.

Speculative fiction magazines are taking the hardest hits -- all are suffering drops in total circulation according to the March 2005 issue of Locus Magazine.

Analog Magazine lost 61% of its paid circulation between 1992 and 2005.

Asimov's Magazine lost 70% of its paid circulation between 1992 and 2005.

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction lost 67% of its paid circulation between 1992 and 2005.

Realms of Fantasy Magazine lost 50% of its paid circulation between 1994 and 2005.

Some would say the decline is gradual, but it looks worse if you consider the industry's failure to keep up with population growth.

According to a 2005 census estimate, the U.S. population (296,410,404) has grown 18.4% since 1990 (241,870,890). This means we have fifty-five and a half million more citizens today with nearly 70% less circulation (if the population hadn't grown at all) in speculative fiction magazines.

Is this a sign of impending doom for the printed word in speculative markets?

When you look at today's most popular magazines (even in the so-called speculative fields), you find pages filled with photos and fluff focusing solely on a single franchise:

Harry Potter movies, the Sci-Fi Channel's Battlestar Galactica, or the expanding video game, Doom. You find very little substance in these publications and no fiction whatsoever.

We constantly hear how today's younger generations are visually driven and prefer a more visual medium. I do not dispute this -- I will, however, dispute the notion that reading good fiction is a nonvisual experience.

Theater of the mind produces sights, sounds and smells that are unique to indi-

"Theater of the mind produces sights, sounds and smells that are unique to individual readers. Ten people can read the same book, yet have ten different interpretations of each character."

vidual readers. Ten people can read the same book, yet have ten different interpretations of each character. After reading the first four books of George R. R. Martin's Fire and Ice series, I found a book of illustrations for that series -- not one of the artists' renditions came close to the incredible visualizations my mind had created.

With so many entertainment options competing for attention, I'm afraid we are depriving our young people of the greatest entertainment medium they could ever enjoy. We are allowing them to experience The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe in a two-dimensional form, when we could give them

a book, inviting them to visit Narnia for themselves.

The late writer and writing teacher John Gardner called fiction a waking dream. When you sleep and dream, you experience the dream as real. And when you enter the waking dream of a well-written short story or novel, it is just as real.

So how do we introduce younger generations to an entertainment medium they (unwittingly) perceive as a boring waste of time?

Critically acclaimed author Pamela Sargent said this subject came up at a convention she and George Zebrowski recently attended. "A guy in the audience suggested that anyone trying to encourage young people to read offer them prizes for reading certain numbers of books," she said,

"and I winced, as I always do whenever anybody makes this kind of boneheaded suggestion, because it only teaches people that reading isn't fun and rewarding in itself, in fact addictive.

"The big problem is that we live in an extremely distracting culture, where nobody seems to have much of an attention span and we're all constantly subjected to interruptions of all kinds, while reading requires long periods of uninterrupted concentration. If we could find a way to give more kids that kind of time at an early age and then provide them with lots of books, that might help."

"As with all reading, the addiction must come early; later, there are too many distractions," Zebrowski added. "I think there will always be some people who learn early and stay a lifetime -- but it's a kind of natural selection that is at work, and the numbers can only be increased with heroic efforts that are too often unavailable."

2007 Grand Master of science fiction -- James Gunn -- concurred. "People (and cultures) fall out of the habit of reading and story telling," he said. "Good habits need to be nourished, and the way to nourish the habit of reading is to expose children at an early age to its pleasures. And science fiction, because it is the literature of our times, has a particular pleasure that needs exposure so that people can consider the future before they have to experience it."

I think Lou Anders, editorial director of Pyr Books, put it best when he said, "Everyone who is a reader today is one because when they were at that crucial age of around 10 to 12, someone thrust a book in their hands and said, 'Hey, read this, you might like it.'"

"Books are like cigarettes -- if you can get hooked early, you are hooked for life. Wait, and you may read, but you won't have the habit. The most important thing anyone can do for the future of speculative fiction is to give a book to a pre-teen. If everyone in our community bought and donated one book to one kid outside their own family, we'd see the effect."

Speculative fiction may indeed survive, but at what

cost? Will the evolution of these genres place literature on the endangered species list? Will movies, video games, and television programs become the main arteries for the speculative fiction industry?

Will e-books take the place of traditional books? Publishers reported eBook revenues went up 23 percent between 2004 and 2005, but the total number of units actually sold (1,692,964) did not increase. Not to mention there were only 5,242 eBooks published dur-

ing this time, according to the 2005 Industry Reports from the International Digital Publishing Forum.

I don't have the answers to these questions, nor do I have an end-all solution to the problem. I do, however, know a neighborhood boy, just down the street, who will soon receive a new speculative fiction book.

It won't be Childhood's End, but I'm hoping it will be just as visual for him -- and just as life-changing. **NA**



01 · 18 · 08

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The Rapeworm

By Charles Coleman Finlay

When the rapeworms began to rain from the Ohio skies, I tossed my two boys in the truck with cases of canned food and all our camping gear, and we headed south for the Hocking Hills, far away from Columbus and the other big cities.

Too many other folks had the same idea. We found a small colony in and around Old Man's Cave, clusters of tents spilling down the gorge from the shelter of the cave all the way to the Devil's bathtub. There were men and women both, which was just plain stupid with the rains coming this far north. Some folks were hostile, but a couple of college kids offered to help us pitch camp.

Josh hung back at my elbow, fidgeting. When the college kids weren't looking, he bumped into me and whispered, "Dad, we have to get

farther away than this."

I looked down at his face, and saw the way he was trying to look mean and strong, and I hoped he wasn't imitating me. He was only thirteen, and his face still had a few soft edges to it.

"Don't be scared," I said.

"I'm not scared."

"Neither am I," I lied.

"It's safe out here."

"No, it's not."

Josh was a news junkie, had been falling asleep at night with CNN, ever since the spaceship--or whatever it was--passed over Earth and the rapeworms started. At first the scientists thought it was a killer asteroid aimed at the planet. Maybe it would have been better for us all if it had been.

"Hey," one of the college kids yelled. "You can leave the kids here, go get your stuff from the car."

Nick, my nine-year-old, tugged frantically at my sleeve, his chin trembling. He talked through clenched teeth, punctuating each word with an angry pause. "Don't. Leave. Us. Here."

I put my arm around him and pulled him close, but he struggled against my grip. "I won't do that. I promise we'll stay together. We'll be okay."

So I told the college kids we'd just go up to the car together so the boys could help me carry stuff. Then when we got to the parking lot, we ran to the car and headed east on Route 56 toward Lake Hope State Park.

It was getting dark. When I first saw the man in the plaid flannel jacket on the side of the road, I figured him for another refugee. But then he saw us, and lurched out into the path of the car waving his arms for us to stop. By the way he moved, all stiff and jerky, I could tell that he was infected.

"Get down," I yelled at the boys. "Get down!"

I tried to steer around him, but he moved fast, if awkwardly. I had a brief nightmare of him flying through the windshield like a deer, because that would be it for us then. But I twisted the wheel at the last second, clipping him with the bumper, and he flew off the side of the road while I held onto the wheel and controlled the car.

"What was that? What was that?" Nick yelled.

Josh's voice was calmer. "Did you hit him? Is he gone? Dad, did you hit him?"

"Don't worry! Settle down!" I yelled. Fighting every natural instinct in my body to

pull off to the side of the road, I put my foot down and hit the gas. "It's all right. Everything's all right."

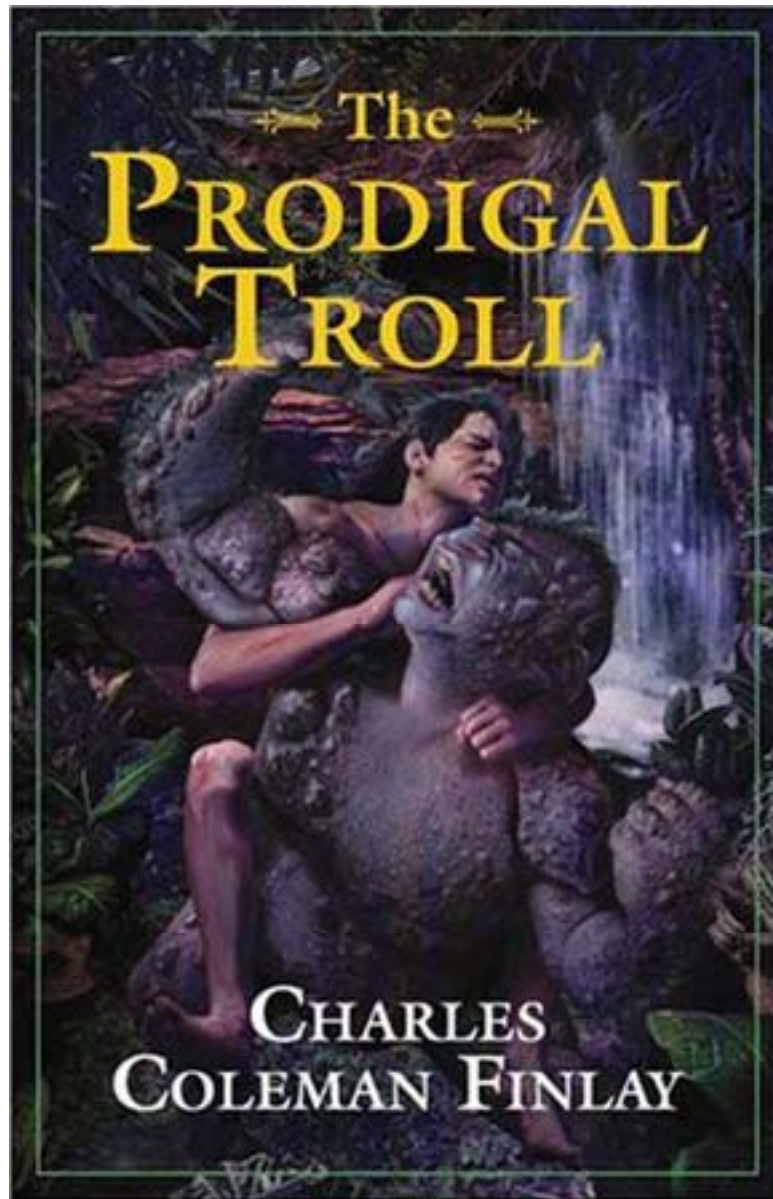
Less than a mile up the road, I saw a car crashed into a ditch, which made me wonder: what if that man wasn't infected? What if he was just an accident victim, injured, looking for help? I pushed those questions out of my mind; I had to assume he was infected.

When I came to the Lake Hope sign, I drove past it.

Soon enough, we were on a dark, unpopulated road that led through the Wayne National Forest. If we stayed on it, we'd end up in the university town of Athens, where there were too many people. So when I saw a gate for an old logging trail into the forest, I pulled over and broke the chain on it with the tire iron. After driving the car through, I closed the gate again and poked through my toolbox for a spare lock to close the gate again. Sure, somebody else might come along and break it later, but there was no need to advertise we were here.

If I'd been thinking ahead, I would have driven all night. South toward Ironton, there were places in the woods as far away from people as we

were likely to get anywhere in Ohio, and the rapeworms were unlikely to spread north into the upper peninsula of Michigan. But it was November, already after seven at night, and in the dark you can't see the rapeworms falling.



Nick was at the frazzled end of his nerves, whining and sucking his thumb, something he hadn't done since kindergarten. I just wanted to be someplace, anyplace. So we found a clearing, out of sight of the road, and we set up camp. Josh seemed glad to have some work

to do. He practically put up the whole tent by himself while I talked to Nick and tried to get him to calm down.

Well after midnight, when I thought they were both asleep in their thermal sleeping bags, I tiptoed back out to the truck to listen to the radio. There were still stations broadcasting from some of the cities in the north. I sat there shivering, scanning the AM radio channels in hopes of any helpful news.

WTVN out of Columbus was dead, but I was able to pick up WJR out of Detroit. Snatches of news came in through the static.

"...scientists are still trying to understand the alien biology of the parasite infection that is sweeping the globe..."

"...officials report that the nuclear device exploded over Orlando, Florida, has sterilized the threat there, and will prevent the spread of further contamination..."

"...meanwhile in Ohio, the governor has extended martial law to the highways. All personal travel is forbidden as long as the crisis lasts. Cars on the highway may be shot without warning..."

When that signal faded, I tried a Cleveland station

with no luck. I could pick up a couple Christian stations out of West Virginia, but I couldn't stomach their message. If we survived, if I saved my kids, then it wasn't the end of the world.

I was lost in these thoughts, watching the breath frost from my nose, when a tap at the window made me jump, and I jerked up my gun and aimed it at my attacker.

It was Nick. He was standing there without his coat on, bawling.

I started sobbing even before I opened the door and gathered him into my arms. I rocked him and told him how sorry I was. Snot ran from my nose while static poured out of the tinny speakers.

After a few moments, we both stopped crying. He snuggled down into my arms. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm listening to music."

I reached out and hit the scan button, looking for something to distract him, but we only caught snatches of news, mostly from the Christian stations in small towns still unaffected by the plague.

"...the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven fallen unto the earth: and there was given to him the key of the pit of the abyss..."

"...and the rest of mankind, who were not killed with these plagues, repented not of the works of their hands..."

"...hallelujah! salva--"

I punched it off. Then I turned off the car, to save the battery and the gas. I started to sing to him, "Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy

to the Levy--"

"Dad, that's an old song. It's so lame."

"I'm glad you're here," I said, tousling his hair.

"Why couldn't we bring Schrody?"

"Schrody's a smart cat. He can look out for himself."

"But who's going to change his litter box?"

I hugged him close, looking through the window as the dashboard light faded. The trees formed a black wall around us, like the sides of a pit, and the darkness of the sky made the stars seem to twitch like maggots. "We get to camp out and pretend we're Indians. Won't that be fun?"

"Where's Mom? Is mom safe?"

I checked my cellphone to see if my ex had called, but the battery was dead and I had forgotten to pack the dashboard charger. Their mother and I had gone through a bitter divorce, which we tried to keep from the boys, even though we split custody. Tomorrow was the usual day I turned them back to her. She would be frantic with worry when she didn't hear from us, but I convinced myself it was better to have no contact until the plague passed. The government had censored pictures of what happened to women infected by the rape-worm, but we heard rumors.

"Yeah, she's safe," I promised. "She wants me to tell you that she misses you."

His eyes brightened for a second, then he sank back down into my arms. "You don't really know."

I held him until he fell

back to sleep. He started to wake up every time I tried to put him down or move him, so I leaned the seat back and fell asleep myself.

When I woke up in the morning, the windows were frosted over with ice, and the sun coming through them was bright and harsh. Josh was in the car too, in the passenger seat, curled up with his head against my arm.

They both looked untroubled in their sleep, the way they always had until just a few months before. I knew I would do whatever I had to do to keep them safe.

After we woke up, I checked our supplies. We had our fishing gear, and I had my grandfather's old single barrel shotgun in the trunk, with a couple boxes of shells. There was also his old Colt .38 revolver, the one he bought to protect his store and then never needed. I had just the shells inside that, and no extras. I didn't like guns, and wouldn't have owned these if I hadn't inherited them.

I checked out our supply of canned foods. If we were careful, we could get through the next few weeks until things settled down.

"Dad, you know what we forgot to pack," Josh said while we ate canned pears for breakfast.

I picked up the can opener where he'd left it on the ground, and put it back in my kit. "No, what?"

"Twinkies. They're the perfect food. They never go stale. They survive anything."

I grinned, and he flashed

a smile back. For a moment, I thought everything would be okay. "I think it's better if we have healthier food," I said.

"I thought you said we were going to have fun," he said.

The way he said it threw the lie back in my face. But I grinned anyway.

Over the next few weeks, Josh and I ate canned food until the green beans tasted like the corn like the peaches like the ham. Nick ate only peanut butter, until all the peanut butter was gone. The three of us sat inside the tent, playing Uno until the day Nick tore all the cards in half because we were out of peanut butter. We were cold all the time and we started to stink, spending day after day in the tent, until Josh started holding his nose shut every time he sat next to me. I didn't pack enough toilet paper, and I screamed at the boys when they used the last roll of it to clean up spilled peaches.

We moved camp twice. The first week, we heard cars roaring by on the nearby roads, so we moved to a clearing farther back in the woods. A week later there were days of planes flying overhead--fighter jets and helicopters--so we moved farther back under the trees. We spent our days watching the skies, staring at the roads, jumping every time a squirrel crunched through the leaves, dashing out our fire any time we heard something like a gunshot.

At nights, when the boys were sleeping, I listened to the radio for news. Scientists still

hadn't found a way to remove the rapeworms from brain tissue without killing the patients. We were no longer in touch with the rest of the world: the Middle East was the first to go completely silent. Americans were moving north across the border into Canada.

I thought about following with the boys, but the gas gauge in the car read empty after I fell asleep one too many times listening to the radio with the engine running.

It was the second week of December when I took the shotgun out to try for a deer, telling the boys they had to stay in the tent until I came back. I was a half mile away when I heard an explosion, and then another, something far away but powerful enough to make the ground shake. I ran all the way back to our camp, and the boys were running out to meet me, and we all waited together for something else to happen.

Snow fell that night, the

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first snowfall of the year that was more than just flurries, three or four inches of it before morning. There was a glow on two horizons, west toward Cincinnati and north toward Columbus, and the fresh snowfall caught the light and spread it everywhere.

Nick had the leftover peanut butter jars, which he had filled full of acorns he collected in the woods. He sat there, shaking them louder and louder, like some kind of shaman trying to ward off evil, until I snapped at him, and told him to be quiet, I just needed some quiet to think.

Before we curled up in our blankets that night, I told the boys to hold my hands. We sat there silently, but I prayed that we would make it. All we had to do was lay low and survive long enough, and my boys would have a chance.

It was in the morning, when we went outside, that we saw the footprints in the snow.

Josh spotted the tracks first when he left the tent to pee. I heard him running back, feet crunching through the snow. He yanked open the tent flap in a panic. "Dad, you gotta see this. Somebody's been watching us."

We all three went. I carried Nick, if only to keep him from hanging onto my legs and tripping me. He growled and bit my shoulder and pounded on me with his fists.

"Look, they're the same size as mine," Josh said. "It's just another kid. Maybe he's out here all by himself."

Nick squirmed out of my arms at that point, eager to take

a look himself.

Together, we trudged through the snow, following the straight line of the trail through the woods. When we came to the road, I realized how stupid I'd been.

"Don't move," I whispered to the boys. And then stepping over to a pine tree, I reached inside and broke off several branches, using them to try to cover up my tracks as I retraced them.

Nick fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, kicking up the snow, but Josh wore a look of horror. "If we can follow them, anyone who comes by here could follow us."

I nodded. "We'll go back to camp, stepping in the same footprints as we go, okay? We'll use the branches to cover our steps."

"What about the other boy?" Nick asked as I scooped him up in my arms.

"What?"

"Yeah," Josh said. "He's probably really scared out here."

"You can't leave him out here, dad."

I damn well could, I thought, but then I saw their faces. If the boy was infected, he would have walked straight into our camp.

"Okay," I said. "But you two have to stay here. You can hide inside this pine tree, and watch me go."

I thought that would be the breaking point, that Nick would change his mind, but he scrambled through the branches, spilling snow, as soon as I put him down. "I'll take care of him," Josh said.

I crossed the road, brushing away both sets of prints as I went. I figured to take a quick look around, then report back to the boys that I couldn't find anything. We'd move our camp again, and this time I would keep a better eye out for other people.

But I was only ten or twenty feet off the road when I saw a splash of camouflage, bright green against the snow, amid a flash of movement.

"Hey, come back!" I called.

I ran after the kid--it was definitely a kid--without bothering to cover my tracks. I came into a small clearing, and saw him standing on the other side, half hidden by a tree.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Baby?"

That was a new voice coming from off to my right. The kid said, "Dad," and ran across the clearing into the man's arms.

Another little family, surviving in the wild, just like us. I put my hands in my pockets, feeling more than a little nervous.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare anyone," I said, taking a step back.

This other man almost made me feel ashamed of myself. He was clean-shaven, with his hair buzzed short; his clothes were clean, and neat, not covered with stains; he had a pair of sunglasses on his face, so that he wasn't squinting at the glare of the snow, and a rifle slung over his shoulder. He had a big wad of gum in his mouth, and he was chewing with loud

smacks.

He came toward me fast, hand extended in greeting. "No problem," he said. "You're that guy who's been camping up on the ridge with his two boys right?"

"Yeah--" I said.

But as soon as his hand closed on mine, I felt something snag in my coat. Looking down, I saw the tip of a hunting knife at my stomach.

He looked me straight in the eye. "Peace, okay?"

I said, "Okay."

He said, "I just want to be clear. We're not friends. If you or your boys do anything to hurt my daughter, or even attempt to hurt my daughter, I will kill you without a moment's hesitation."

I looked over at the kid. Now that he said something, I could see she was definitely a girl--the longer hair, the small chin, the thinner body--probably the same age as Josh. Her dad lowered the knife, let go of my hand, and took a step back. "Are we clear?" he asked.

I pulled my hand out of my coat pocket and showed him the .38 that I had aimed at him all along. "I feel the same way about my boys. So I think we have an understanding."

A small grin twitched at the corner of his mouth. Like he was a man who'd used a gun, and knew how to recognize one who hadn't. Holding up his knife, he said, "You should save those bullets. They may be hard to replace."

"I figure I won't use them unless I absolutely need to." I hoped that I was implying, don't make me need to.

He blew a big pink bubble and let it pop. "You boys make an awful lot of noise up there."

The guy's name was Mike, Mike Leptke, and his daughter's name was Amanda. She was a year younger than Josh, but about ten years more mature in that way that girls have.

Mike would have been just as happy if we walked away and he never saw us again, but Amanda was bored with her Dad's company, and used to getting her own way, so by the end of the week she was coming over to our camp every day to play with the boys. Nick came out of his shell, and would run off after Amanda and Josh, throwing snowballs at them. She got all big-sisterly around him.

One sunny morning, on a day the temperatures shot up to above freezing, we were sitting in our camp eating venison that Mike had shot and cleaned. Mike had built a good-sized fire, without much smoke, and for the first time in weeks, I didn't feel cold. The kids ran off into the woods pretending to be Indians.

"Have you ever seen the rapeworms?" I asked, voicing something that had been on my mind for a while. "What if they aren't real?"

"Oh, they're real. I was stationed at Fort Benning when they fell on Atlanta."

"No shit?"

"They look like dandelion fluff coming out of the sky. They'll hitch a ride on anything, but they only do shit to people." He shook his head. "I went

AWOL--so did a lot of other guys after that--and came back to Ohio as fast as I could. Stole Amanda from my ex when she wouldn't give her up."

"Ah."

"It's us or them, us or them. I hope they nuked 'em all straight back to hell." He looked away. "What if," he asked, and then stopped.

"What if what?" I said, helping myself to another plate of stew. I had done my best to shave, and had melted enough water to wash most of the things in our camp, including myself and the boys.

"What if we're the only people left?" Mike asked, in a tone that said it was painful for him.

"That's crazy," I said around a mouthful of the best food I'd had in over a month.

He had his sunglasses on, so I couldn't see his eyes, and he always had a smile at the corner of his mouth. He lowered his head and spit between his feet. "What if it isn't?"

I didn't say anything. I wasn't ready to think about Josh and Amanda as some kind of Adam and Eve.

"You were smart enough to get out of the cities," he said, and then didn't say any more, seemingly on the principle that if you couldn't say something nice, don't say anything.

"Yeah?"

He shook his head. Then after a while, he said, "You mind if I take your older boy, Joshua, out in the woods and show him how to use a rifle?"

I was torn. I didn't let the boys touch the guns we had--my old beliefs were too

ingrained. But I could see his reasoning.

Before I could answer him, Josh came running back into the camp. "Dad! Mike! Nick, he found--"

We jumped up from the log we sat on and Josh froze, his mouth moving, but no words coming out.

Mike walked toward him. "What is it? Where's Amanda?"

"Sh-sh-she was trying to help--"

"Where's Amanda?"

Josh turned and ran back the way he came, and we ran after him. I stumbled, tripped, ran into trees, trying to keep up--what had happened to Nick?

Mike trotted easily at Josh's side, his head up, eyes scanning the woods. As soon as he saw Nick's bright blue coat against the mottled brown of bark and leaves, he bolted for him.

"Where's Amanda?" he said.

I ran past Josh, who stood rooted well away from his brother, and reached Nick's side at the same moment that Mike jumped back.

There was a dog, dead at Nick's knees, a once beautiful golden retriever with a dirty

white-and-green collar.

Its coat had gone grey, and it appeared to be molting right before our very eyes.

I jumped back ten feet, just as Mike had.

The dog was covered



with hundreds of maggoty worms, silver grey and slick, sprouting fluff-clouds of micro-wire thin cilia at one end. The cilia moved, like the tentacles of tiny squids, tugging the creatures across the ground. The cilia sparked, seemingly at random, little blue explosions

like static electricity.

"Nick?" I said, circling around to see his face.

His open mouth was full of the worms. Tiny tufts hung from his nose. One worm banged at the corner of his

eye, pushing at his tear duct--while we watched, it shoved its way in, wiggling until it disappeared.

"Shit!"

"Dad, I'm so sorry, dad!" Josh was crying, scared. "We were playing hide and seek--he--"

"It's okay, son," Mike said. My tongue was pinned to my throat and I couldn't speak. "Amanda ran to hide when she saw them, right?"

"She--" Josh sobbed, unable to speak.

"It's okay," Mike said, taking a step away at angle away from all of us. "Which direction did she go?"

"They got in her face!" he screamed. "Before we could stop them."

Mike walked away without a word. I stood there--staring at Josh, staring

at Nick, watching the worms crawl off the dog toward my kneeling son. I was sick. I didn't know what to do, didn't know who to ask. Josh took another step away, rubbed the corners of his eyes. "It's not my fault!" he said.

I wanted to scream at

him, to say, hell, yes it was his fault, it was all his fault. But I knew the words were really directed at myself.

"It's not your fault," I whispered. I wasn't sure who I was talking to.

Mike returned in moments, wearing a gas mask like some kind of steel and plastic bug. He emptied a can of gasoline all over the corpse of the dog. The smell made me think of gas stations, of normal days. I ran up and grabbed Nick by the collar, dragging his limp body back as Mike tossed a match and the dog went up in flames.

"Look," I said, pointing at Nick. "Look, he's okay! They're all off him!"

"They're not off him," Mike said as the flames danced in the reflections of his goggles. "They're in him."

"What?"

"He's too young. He'll sit catatonic like that until he dies--unless you feed him. Then he'll sit that way until he hits puberty and the rapeware kicks in."

"What?"

"Amanda can't have gone far, not yet. We're going to catch her before she joins the bang at Athens."

Athens was the home of Ohio University, nested in the wooded hills of southern Ohio. Mike was convinced that's where the rapeworm colony had collected.

"Because it's the biggest city around?" I asked.

"No," he said, as he thumped a box of clinking wine bottles into the bed of his 4x4. "Because the dog was wearing an O.U. collar--green and white,

go Bobcats."

"Ah."

We left Nick with Josh in one of Mike's deer blinds across the road. Bitter smoke filled the sky where the fire was smoldering out amid the snow-wet trees and the wet leaf cover.

"Dad, don't leave me here," he said.

"You have to be brave," I said. "We're going to go rescue Amanda, but I promise we'll come back."

After Mike and I climbed into his truck and pulled out of the woods onto the main road, he said, "Don't kid yourself--we're not going to rescue Amanda."

He had to choke out the words.

To calm himself down, he started to explain that in Georgia, they'd seen the victims of the worm follow the paths of least resistance, moving along roads to the places where they gathered, what the soldiers had called bangs.

"Why bangs?" I asked.

He looked at me like I was stupid.

"Huh?"

Mike shook his head. Then he lifted his fist in the air and made a whistling sound like a bomb falling as he lowered it toward the dash. When it touched down, he popped it open and said, "Bang."

"Ah."

"Yeah, there was that reason too. Once a bang started we used to let them gather until there were enough to make the strike count," he said. Then he had to knuckle the corner of his eye. He shook it off and kept his head up, scanning the sides

of the road for Amanda as we drove toward Athens.

I had the .38 in my pocket and the shotgun on my lap. Mike had checked both of them for me. He was loaded with ordinance like some video game character. I didn't like the way this was headed.

"The people who are infected, they're still people," I said.

"Maybe not. The scientists were saying that the worms don't just rewire the brains when they lodge in them, they rewrite the DNA. The military guys thought, given enough time, they'll find a virus or something that will take it out."

"But the people, like Amanda, like Nick, we can do something for them, keep them safe, keep them comfortable, until we find a cure--"

He laughed out loud.

"Wait until we get to Athens, you'll see," he said.

But we didn't get to Athens. We came up over a hill, and Mike slammed on the brakes. "Shit," he said.

He put it in reverse and backed down below the rim of the road.

Just over the hill, there was an old white farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. Next to the house were three tall blue silos and a red barn with the name *McAufley, 1895* spelled out in colored shingles on the roof. A long, one-story animal shed stood next to an unharvested cornfield.

I had to wait until we loaded up and crouched back to the top of the road to see what Mike had seen instantly.

The farmhouse door hung open, with the ripped ends of curtains fluttering through the broken glass of the windows. On the barn, a rope hung from the hayloft pulley, spiraling around and around in the wind. The cornfield was unharvested and a combine was tipped on its side in a ditch by the road.

There were people moving around the animal shed.

The shed was on the far side of the other buildings. We approached it carefully, creeping along the fence for cover. The stench of blood and shit and sugar was overwhelming. Anguished moans sounded and faded.

"Something's wrong here," I whispered. "The worms didn't start falling until after the harvest. There shouldn't be any corn--"

"Some folks thought it was the end of the world and stopped doing everything," Mike said, shrugging. He nodded at the combine. "Maybe there was a rapture, and this guy was the only guy who got taken."

Something rustled in the corn, the tall stalks swaying. Mike pushed me to the ground, dropped beside me, and brought up his gun.

An old man in a Tommy Hilfiger sweater walked out of the corn: his hair and beard were untrimmed and unkempt; his clothes hung from his body, tatters trailing like fringes from his arms; his smile was beatific and he mumbled nonsense words as he carried an armful of corn back toward the shed.

Mike gestured me to

come along, and we followed the bearded guy around the other side of the shed, where we ducked down behind a four hundred gallon gas tank.

One wall of the shed had been pulled open, and the building was divided in half. On one side, a boy rested in the bed of straw. A woman crawled away from him, pulling ragged clothes back on. I was relieved to see it wasn't Amanda.

On the other side of the shed, a dozen or more women were lined up in rows. Their heads were covered with rags, and pieces of old shag carpet and odd bits of blanket were wrapped around their shoulders to keep them warm. They stood in thawing mud, bare feet shifting constantly. The sound that I had mistaken for moaning was a constant low murmur of nonsense words.

When I saw that many of them were pregnant, I wanted to puke.

Mike shifted position, crouching around the other end of the tank. He was looking for Amanda. I was too disgusted to move. Every bone and muscle in my body screamed at me to throw down my guns and run away.

One woman moaned louder than the others. Her swollen belly popped out of her sparkly tee-shirt and soiled sweatpants.

The boy rose up from his bed of straw--he was not much older than Josh, with no beard to speak of and pale as a ghost. When he leaned in to sniff the woman's mouth, she tried to bite his nose. He jerked his head away, then he bent down to

sniff her crotch. Something satisfied him, because he tilted his head back and crooned in some inhuman language.

The old man in the fringe-tatter Tommy Hilfiger sweater dropped his new armload of earcorn and came, whining out his own reply. A third man, still wearing his business suit and tie, but hairy and ragged-alien like the others, came trotting around the corner.

Thing was, I could have known any of those men. I even recognized the cheerful smiles on their faces from a thousand days at the office, from the trips to the mall, from the visits to school.

While I stood there uselessly, Mike ran over to a Chevy parked near the far end of the shed and held a scope in his hand to peer inside.

Tommy Hilfiger and Three-piece repeated the sniffing at mouth and crotch while the woman moaned and panted, clearly in labor. The women around her shuffled out of her way, keeping up their continuous flow of jabberwocky.

The old man took out a knife and handed it to the pale boy. They exchanged words in their weird groaning language, and then without prelude, the boy thrust the knife into the underside of the woman's belly.

I jerked up the shotgun, banging it into the tank, startling myself. I shrunk back, expecting to be seen, but the others were too focused on their task.

The ghostly boy sliced the woman open from hip to hip. At first I thought her intestines were spilling out: then I

saw that it was a pile of worms, silver gray and wet, hundreds or thousands of them, swimming like a school of squids out of the ocean of her belly.

She moaned with another contraction. Three-piece reached his hand up into her stomach and pulled.

A creature flopped out. At first I thought it was a human baby, stillborn, deformed--its head was too small to be fully developed. I thought it was just food for the worms to feed on, and I waited for the mass of tiny creatures to engulf it.

But as the bloody red thing hit the ground, it lifted its head and cried out. It pushed itself up on all fours--its limbs were as inhuman as its head--and began climbing up the woman's body. She was braced against the wall of the shed, the old man tying her to the wall to hold her upright. Three-piece and the ghost helped the monster climb, petting it and stroking it, crooning to it as it went. The baby bent its squat neck back and cried out again.

The mother cried back, word for word, weakly, fading. The sound sent chills through me, as did the sight of the baby ripping open her shirt and biting into her breast.

"Amanda!"

Mike walked into plain view, toward his daughter, who, I saw now, was hidden in the midst of a cluster of women at the farthest end of the shed.

Her head turned at his voice. She smiled as though she was happy to see him, though her eyes were blank.

Other heads also turned

at the sound of his voice. The baby lifted its weirdly disfigured crown and screeched. The mass of worms on the ground wriggled and pulsed in his direction. The three men left the side of the woman and ran toward him.

Mike aimed his gun, and with short controlled bursts, dropped the old man and the ghost. Three-piece fell down, but rose again, blood pouring from his side and from the defensive wounds in his outstretched arms.

My teeth were chattering but I stepped around the tank with the shotgun raised. I was screaming curse words, the same words, over and over and over.

Still I couldn't bring myself to shoot.

Mike took a step back and shot Three-piece again, dropping him for good. The women in the shed keened and flapped their arms like a flock of frightened birds. Answering calls came from the fields and the houses.

I grabbed Mike by the arm. "We have to get out of here!"

"Amanda," he said. "I'm so sorry, Amanda."

She pressed forward, smiling at the sound of his voice: but she echoed the keening cry of the other women, and began to flail her arms.

He shot her in the head, knocking her back and leaving a hole in the wall of bodies.

There were more men coming from the fringes of the farm, out of the house and the cornfield. I had my fist in Mike's jacket, dragging him

backward toward the road. He pulled away from me long enough to light one of the molotov cocktails he had brought along. The flaming bottle arched through the air and landed in the dry straw of the shed.

The flames raced across the stalls like a golden retriever running to greet its master. The women seemed unable to flee the shed. As they jerked and struggled in the flames, their screams sounded more and more human. The men running out of the cornfields went right past Mike and me, throwing themselves into the flames to try to rescue the most pregnant of the women.

I was retreating, trying to pull Mike along. He was emptying his gun into the screaming bodies, screaming along with them, their voices merged into a single wall of sound that threatened to overwhelm and drown me.

Only the baby escaped the inferno. It had dropped from its mother's breast at the first roar of the flame, and now it ran, bloody-mouthed, on all fours with its little lizard's gait toward us.

Mike pointed his gun at the monster, but the trigger clicked on an empty chamber.

The creature stretched out its clawed hand to Mike's leg, while he tripped, staggering backward, fumbling to switch magazines.

I stepped forward with my shotgun. Raising it over my head, I slammed the butt down on the baby's head. I hit it over and over, until the stock cracked and flew off, and then I beat at it with the barrel, until the head

was pulp pounded into the dirt. I couldn't even see what I was doing, my eyes were so blurry with tears, my vision red with fury.

Mike pulled me away and I threw the barrel on the monster and yelled at it. My elbow was bleeding, where the gun had gone off and grazed me with the shot. I didn't even notice when it happened.

As we drove away, the flames reflected in the window of his truck. It felt like the whole world was on fire.

When we were in the car, driving back to our camps, I kept thinking about the way Mike had shot his daughter rather than see her like that. I wanted to be like Mike. If I had to be, I wanted to be strong like he was.

I didn't want to see my children suffer.

Before we went back to the deer blind, Mike made me wash up so I wouldn't scare Josh with all the blood on me. He talked a lot, more than usual for him--self-recriminations, how he should have extended his perimeter, taken out that bang earlier; talk about teaching Josh how to shoot, heading north for colder country.

We looked into the blind, and I saw that Josh had taken off his belt and tied himself to one of the corner posts.

"What's up, big man?" I said, trying to sound light-hearted.

He was shaking, sitting on his hands to keep them still. His voice was very low.

"It was only one, Dad. There was only one that got on my face, that's it, only one. I didn't know what it was. Nick was saying how they tickled--how it was dandelion seeds but they tickled."

I looked over at Nick, sitting catatonic in the corner. The JIF peanut butter jar had fallen out of his pocket; it was filled with a dozen squirming worms, setting off tiny blue sparks like little fireflies. The J had peeled off the label, leaving a glowing, brightly colored jar of IF.

Josh saw me see it, and his face went sick. He gritted his teeth, put on his meanest face, and said nothing, trying not to shake.

Mike said, "Good work, Joshua. Smart. I need to talk to your dad for a second."

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We stepped away from the blind. Mike put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry," he said.

I was shaking my head, rubbing my eyes. He said, "It's all right. I'll take care of it. You had my back at the bang, I got yours here."

I swallowed deep, knowing he was right, wishing that I had known him before everything went so bad, wishing that we could have been friends, that Amanda and Josh could have grown up together. I took a deep, loud breath, and willed my chest to stillness.

Looking him in the eye, I said, "Thanks. Thanks. But I can do it. I need to do this myself."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure."

He nodded approval, and I found myself wanting his approval as he reached into my pocket and pulled out the revolver. He flipped it open, checked the bullets, and pressed it into my hand.

"After this, we're going to go kill all those fucking alien monster bastards," he said. "All right?"

"All right."

"Dad?" Josh said uncertainly.

"I'll be right there," I said.

Mike patted me on the back. The Colt felt heavy in my hand, like an anchor keeping me in harbor during a storm.

I raised the gun and shot Mike in the face.

He toppled backward, and lay on the ground, his head a bloody wound that lay open to the sky.

"Dad!" Josh cried.

"I'm right here."

I went into the blind.

Josh's teeth were chattering. He was pale and shaking, and his eyes had already started to take on the glazed look. He saw the gun in my hand.

"I don't want it to hurt," he whispered. "Don't let it hurt."

"I won't."

The thing is this: even with the alien taking over, some part of us remains in them, some essential piece of our DNA remains unchanged. I have to believe that. I thought of the way Amanda turned her head at the sound of her father's voice. Her tongue was inhuman, but her face was full of joy.

So I put down my gun. Untying Josh's bonds, I say, "Come here," and I take him in my arms. He squeezes me tight. I look at Nick, who's already somewhere else, and I pull him onto my lap. I reach down and pick up the peanut butter jar full of rapeworms.

I unscrew the lid and pull one out. Pinched between my thumb and finger, it writhes, cilia twitching and setting off tiny blue sparks.

Josh buries his face against my shoulder, torn between clinging to me and pushing away so he can follow the siren call of the worm in his brain. His voice is weak, not hardly his own voice any more.

"Dad, I'm scared."

"Yeah, me too."

Holding him to me, I lift the rapeworm to my nose. It sparks as it enters, tickling, making me want to choke. I taste a spurt of hot blood. Then

I take hold of Nick's hand, and Josh's, and we rise. When we go, we'll all go together. NA

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THE TARGET AUDIENCE

by Cherie Priest

An enormous black woman in a crisp blue uniform stood guard at the flimsy, flapping line of police tape. With a slick flip of his wrist, Leatus Balter tried to flash his badge, but its protective wallet tangled on his knuckles and he hit her with it instead.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm—"

"I know who you are." She lifted the tape. "Gary said you were coming. Welcome to Seattle, detective."

He stooped a little limbo and ducked underneath the bright plastic strip. "Thanks. And I'm sorry about that. Hitting your ... hitting you."

"You socked me in the tit, but I won't take it personal. You're at eye level with a whole lot of real estate there, aren't you, Shorty? Come on. Traffic's not getting any nicer, and the M.E. wants to cart her back to the slab before sundown."

Leatus joined a circle of people who were snapping pictures and jotting down notes. An ambulance was parked nearby, its back doors leaning open.

Down on the ground, an elderly woman was lying with a

bus's street cable draped across her torso.

"She looks surprised," Leatus said.

Gary Dickie gave a little snort. "Go on, someone might as well say it."

"Say what?"

"Everyone's thinking it—that she looks *shocked*."

"Well, she does."

Gary laughed. "The cable melted her damn glasses to her face when it hit her. That'd shock me, too."

She was sprawled on her back, half on the sidewalk and half on the curb; and her tortoiseshell Lucite frames had indeed melted into her skin. The lenses had settled down against her brow bone, so she appeared to be staring out through a pair of cloudy portholes. Her dress was brown with small blue flowers. One of her orthopedic shoes had been blown off into the street. The other was dangling from her ankle by a broken strap.

Leatus crouched down beside her and wrinkled his nose against the pork-sweet stink of burned flesh. He looked up at the place where the cable had broken. He looked back down at the white-haired woman.

"Is there enough electricity in those lines to do this? This looks more like, I don't know. She doesn't look like she got tagged with a power cable. More like

she's been struck by lightning."

"Lightning?"

"Yeah. Comes down from the sky during thunderstorms. Fascinating stuff," Leatus said.

"How long have you been here?"

"Couple of weeks."

"Then I guess you wouldn't know," Gary took a stretching, long-legged step across the woman's body. "We don't get those too often. I'd say the odds of this old bird getting cooked by lightning were roughly ... well, I don't know. Isn't getting hit by lightning the universal example of shit that never happens to people?"

"Something strange happened to her."

"Sure. The lady hit by a snapped streetcar cable. Very unfortunate, completely bizarre, and kind of disgusting. But that's all it is. There's nothing to detect here, detective. Accidents happen."

Leatus shook his head and wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "Then let the M.E. have her. Do we know who she is?"

"We've got a purse. The current knocked it out of her hand." He held up a boxy black bag with shiny hardware that locked its hinges shut. "Wallet says she's Abigail Cater."

"I'll take it back with me and see if I can track down any next of kin."

"Have fun." Gary handed

the bag to Leatus and signaled to the men beside the ambulance. “Go on. I’m right behind you.”

Leatus was astonished by the sheer weight of the purse. It was smaller than a toaster, but it pulled heavily against its straps as it hung from his hand.

He pinched the fastener and the bag sprang open. Tissues, mints, and a wallet the size of a salmon lunged up and almost out, but he jammed it all back into place and did his best to squeeze the purse into submission. By the time he’d reached his car, he’d surrendered to the bag’s uncanny entropy and stuffed the whole package under his arm—where it bounced and strained until he released it onto the passenger’s seat.

Alone with the buzzing static of the police band radio, and still fighting the stench of cooked octogenarian, he almost made a grousing declaration about how things like this never happened in Boise.

But Gary was outside the passenger’s side window, pressing his round, pasty face against it and rapping with his fingertips. So Leatus restrained himself and popped the locks to let him in.

Back at the station, Leatus used the end of his pen to push the contents of the purse around on his desk. Most of the purse’s holdings were to be expected; they were old lady things, as if a bathroom medicine cabinet and a nightstand drawer had been upended into the bag.

In her wallet were pictures of a man, presumably her husband. None of them were more recent than the Clinton years, so Leatus thought perhaps he had died. There was also a picture of a younger guy who bore some resemblance to

them both, and this must be a son. No obvious grandchildren, though. A business card that belonged to a reverend from a local Methodist church, a parking ticket, and several dollars worth of change rounded out the remaining contents. A twenty dollar bill had been folded neatly between her driver’s license and her bank card.

But one thing stood out. Jammed into a side pocket Leatus found a small disc, a DVD from a handheld recorder. It was stuck awkwardly in a plastic case, and the case was cracked but the disc looked okay.

There was no label, and no indication of what it might be.

In one of the conference rooms there was a DVD player and a television. Leatus checked to make sure no one was using the room, and when he discovered that it was empty he closed the door behind himself. The disc fit neatly into the spindle and the drawer slid shut.

The disc spun and spooled, and began to play.

It opened with a panoramic shot of a wide, open road in the middle of a spot that could best be described as “nowhere,” but might have been anyplace between Arizona and California. Sprawling red earth stretched and piled into low hills pockmarked with gray-green brush and boney rocks.

A tiny white car was driving along the road, tootling down the lonely strip without another vehicle in sight. The license plate wasn’t quite visible. There was almost no sound, except for the low hum of high winds gusting across the scenery.

Then a woman’s voiceover began the strangest narration Leatus had ever heard.

“Dear God in heaven, we know you work in mysterious ways,” she said. “Children go hungry and evildoers prosper, and we do not pretend to understand these things. We believe that you know what’s best. After all, the Bible tells us that you see the beginning and the end.”

The car continued its path, making imperceptible progress against the unchanging landscape. But a shadow was creeping up across the sky, casting a sinister line on the ground. The crawling line slithered up to the car and covered it.

When the first smattering drops of rain fell, Leatus noticed the seams around the effect. It was CGI. In fact, the longer he watched the scene, the more certain he became that the car didn’t exist either.

“So Lord, it is with great humility and intense prayer that we come to you with this petition. The rivers of your will sweep across the land, consuming some and blessing others. We ask you to hear our prayers and remember us, and to judge our requests—strange though they may be. Thy will be done, but we ask to impose upon that will. Work our requests into your plan, O Lord.”

Whoever the speaker was, she’d lost all credibility with Leatus right around the time she used the phrase “great humility,” but there was a fascinating cadence to her words. He couldn’t look away, or turn it off.

“We ask you dear Father to indulge us, and bend your plan to consider our needs.”

As the rain beat down on the solitary car, the roaring wind growled closer, louder, and with greater force. It sounded like the

car was being chased by a freight train. And right when Leatus thought he was going to have to turn the volume down, a swirling black tornado swooped down on the car from behind.

Leatus froze, his finger hovering inches from the button that would dampen the sound.

The twister bit down onto the car and spun it hard. It lifted the vehicle up and smashed it down on the ground. The car shattered against the pavement and caught fire. It burned there, charring the center line and bursting into louder fire when the gas tank sparked.

"Hear us, Heavenly Father. Our prayers are small and our requests are slight. Forever and ever we remain your devoted flock. Amen."

A final close-up shot of the car demonstrated beyond a doubt that no one was escaping.

"What the hell?" the detective asked. The short, peculiar video ended with a fade to black, and Leatus spied the remote control on top of the TV, so he picked it up. He tried to find the main menu, and he searched for any hidden extras. But so far as he could tell, the disc was otherwise empty.

Gary was waiting for him back at his desk. "Where were you?"

"Conference room three.

With the TV."

"What for?"

Leatus held up the disc and passed it to his partner. "Watching this. That's some weird shit, right there."

"How so?" Gary turned it over in his fingers, noting the cracked case and shiny, rainbow-metallic surface.

"I think it's one of those

that?"

"Apparently. You watch it, and tell me what it looks like."

Gary dropped the disc onto his side of the desk and dropped himself into his chair. "That's got to be illegal somehow. It's conspiracy to commit murder, or accessory to murder, or ... or something like that. At the very least," he waved at the disc, "it's fraud, right?"

Somebody paid money to make this thing."

"That one's still up for grabs," Leatus said. "It's just like those psychic lines and palm readers. As long as it's for entertainment purposes only, then the law doesn't care what damn fool thing people spend their money on. Unless it's hookers and blow."

"Who the fuck entertains themselves by making commercials that ask God to kill people? You think our cooked bird had it made?"

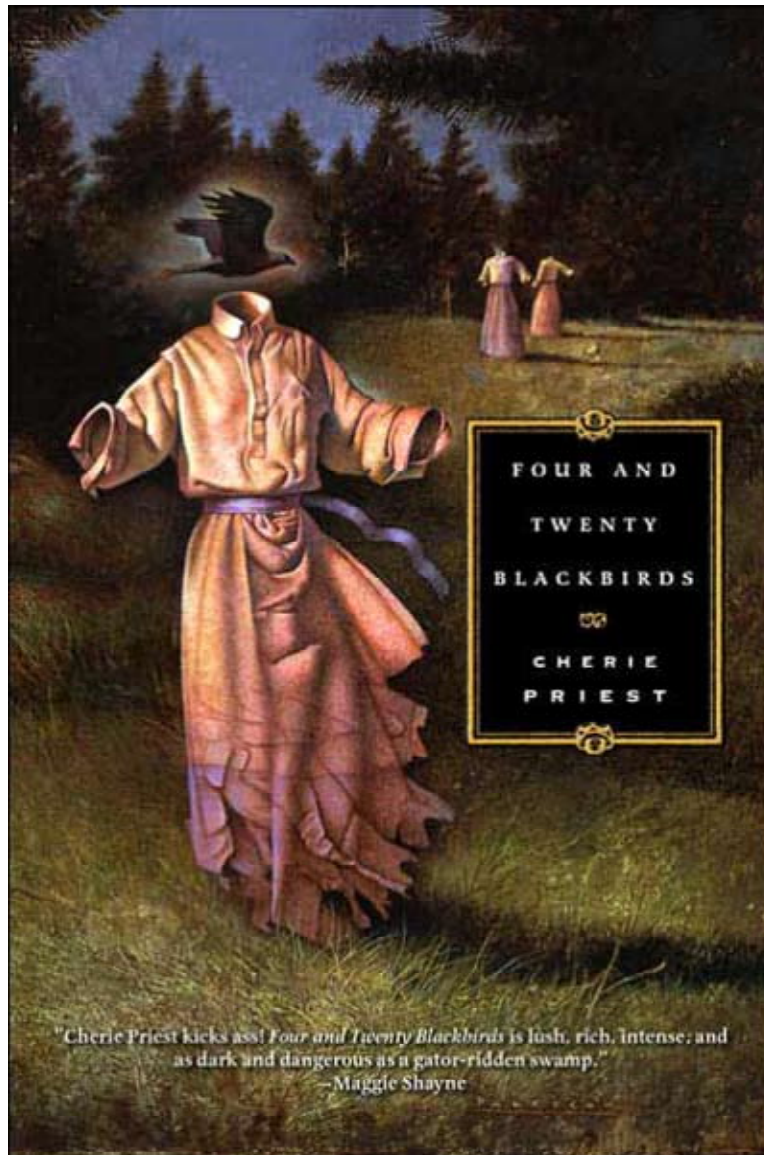
"There's no telling. Did you reach any of her next-of-kin?"

"No. I found a listing for her son, his name's Sam. But I couldn't get hold of him in person. Had to leave a message."

"He wasn't at work?"

"He doesn't work.

Near as I can tell, he lived with his mother. He's one unlucky bastard." Gary pulled out his notebook and ticked off a list. "His father died back in '92, his wife died back in August, his brother was killed a few months ago, and now his



commercials. You know, those prayer commercials that are a total crock. But it's creepy. It's not asking for a pony, or for a million dollars. I think it's a prayer to kill somebody."

"What? Can you even do

mother's been tasered by a power cable."

"That's ... quite a list. Poor guy," Leatus shook his head. "Or not, do you think? That's an impressive string of coincidence."

"I checked. All of it was clean. Father died of his third heart attack. Brother got caught in a rockslide while he was out camping. Wife died in a car wreck that the insurance company called a no-fault. It's just bad luck, a whole rotten string of it. I don't mind telling you, I wasn't too upset when he wasn't home. I know someone's got to break his mother's death to him, but I'm not crying because it wasn't me."

"I don't blame you," Leatus said, but that wasn't true. He did blame Gary, because he knew his partner well enough to know that he probably hadn't tried as hard as he claimed he had. And that meant Leatus would probably be stuck with the task, and he could think of a few million other ways he'd rather spend his time.

The next day he couldn't find Sam Cater, though. He tried all the likely places and even got permission from the landlord to check Abigail's apartment.

Inside it smelled like lemon-scented furniture polish, dried lavender, phlegm, and hair spray. But no one was home, and by the looks of things, no one had been home for days. Sam lived in the extra bedroom. It featured one plain chest of drawers and a matching twin-sized bed, which was covered by a thin blue quilt. Except for a bottle of uncapped nose spray and a holey-toed sock on the floor, there wasn't much to indicate that anyone ever slept there.

Leatus drove back to the station and found a woman waiting

at his desk.

She was Asian, but not all Asian. She was wearing a gray pantsuit that looked somewhat too conservative for the maroon streaks that ran through her tied-up hair.

"Tara Henkle," she introduced herself, standing and shaking his hand. "I'm from Northwest Insurance, and I'd like to talk to you about the woman who was killed on Pioneer Square yesterday. More specifically, I want to ask you about her son."

"Sam? I've been looking for him all day. What does the insurance company want with him?"

"We want to give him money. Or actually, we don't want to give him a dime—but we're obligated to. You've been investigating him, is that right? Is that why you were looking for him?"

"Well, no. We're just trying to tell him about his mother. But ..." he wasn't sure what else to say, so he stopped talking.

"But you've looked into him, a little bit. I have to assume." She pulled a slim briefcase up from the floor. She clicked it open and withdrew a series of photographs.

"We learned that he's one amazingly unlucky bastard."

"Is that how you interpreted it? My company might beg to disagree. This is his late brother, Frank Richard Cater." She spread a black and white portrait photo across the desk. "He was an aspiring actor and outdoors enthusiast who lived in Tacoma. During a camping trip with some friends, a shelf of rock snapped off and slid down a hill in the middle of the night—taking out just one tent at the bottom. His."

"So bad luck runs in the family."

She shook her head and

reached into the briefcase again, this time pulling out a snapshot. Leatus recognized Sam from the photo in his mother's wallet. A skinny brunette woman stood beside him. "This is Lisa Cater, rather recently deceased. She and Sam separated a couple of years ago but never formally divorced, and she went to live in Texas. She was driving back to Seattle to sign the divorce papers—they were going to finally make it official—and somewhere in Utah she got swept up in a storm. When the highway patrol found what was left of her car, they said it looked like she'd driven straight into a tornado."

Leatus tried not to look unduly surprised or interested.

Tara Henkle cracked a dry smile.

"And Abigail Cater," she said. "You know what they say. Once an accident, twice a coincidence, three times a conspiracy. And here's my problem—I don't want to know what they call number four."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stiffened and then leaned forward. "You really don't know where Sam is?"

"No. Do you?"

"Not exactly. But I might be able to help. And I want to help, not just as a matter of professional principle. Wherever he is, whatever he's doing, I can promise you this: he's making more commercials."

Leatus shook his head and knocked his pen against the desk. "But why? And against who? There's no one left for him to kill at a profit, is there?"

"If he has any relatives left out there, he's not insuring them through us. But there's still some-

one left standing between him and his money.” The fear on her face was real, and it was easy to read.

“You think you’re number four.”

Her voice sank, and some of her chilled confidence wilted.

“Things are starting to ... happen. Little things, that taken individually wouldn’t mean much. It makes me sound paranoid and crazy to talk about them, but I’m well past coincidence territory here. Two days ago, my office was struck by lightning. It blew out my window and could’ve killed me, except that I’d gotten up to use the restroom. Totaled my laptop, though. Yesterday my car blew out a tire on the way down Capitol Hill, and I almost shot myself out into Lake Union. And this morning, Jesus.” She sighed and rolled her head back as if her neck was sore. “This morning while I was out on a call, checking out fire damage on the east side, I swear to God there was a bear.”

“A bear?”

“A bear,” she nodded. “The house’s lot backs up to the mountain and there’s plenty of woods — but the thing came charging, flinging itself along in that loping run they do. I made it back to the SUV and locked myself inside, but the damn thing broke the window and kept trying to grab me.”

“You look none the worse

for wear,” Leatus observed.

“My client ran to his neighbor’s house, and the neighbor had a gun. And that was the third strike in as many days.” She was shaking, using one hand to fret against her briefcase handle. “I don’t

a winning lottery ticket or ... or a spouse, or whatever else people use them for.”

“But I do. In fact, in the last couple of days I’ve made a point of looking around for that kind of thing. You could hardly

blame me, could you?”

She reached back into the briefcase and pulled out clippings. Most of them had been printed from internet news sites, but a few had been pulled or photocopied from the newspaper. “This guy’s wife was cured of cancer. This girl’s father narrowly avoided an IED in Iraq. This man’s home was saved from a hurricane, even though his entire neighborhood was leveled. You can go through these, if you want. They check out. And they all have one weird miracle in common.”

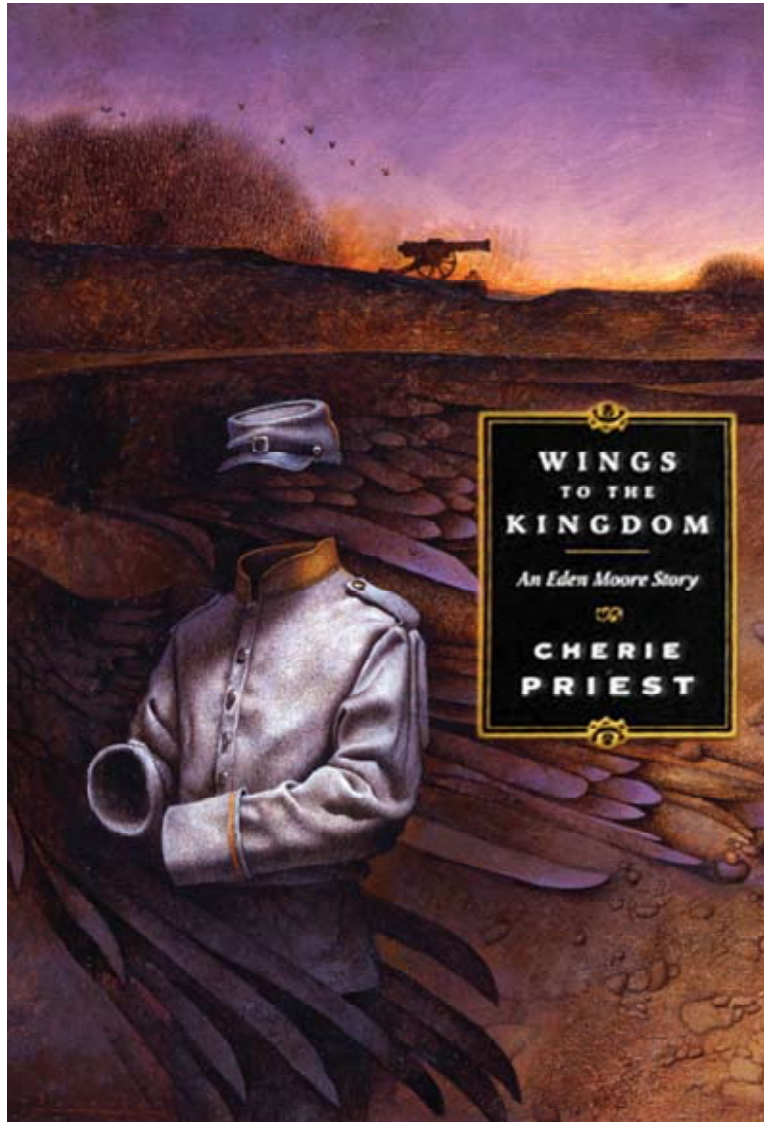
“The commercials.”

“The commercials,” she confirmed. And sensing the doubt mingling with the detective’s interest, she added, “Look, I’m not a superstitious woman.

I figured this was just

one more get-rich-quick scheme for psychics and palm readers. But the people who put these things together, they’re not the usual batch of scoundrels and fiends. They’re people with divinity degrees. They’re retired ministers and serious students of a whole spectrum of dogmas and creeds. And some of them are getting results.”

Leatus rubbed his forehead,



know what to do.”

Leatus put his pen down and sat back in his squeaky-hinged desk chair. “Ms. Henkle, I’m not sure what you want me to do. These commercials are ... well, quite frankly they’re a crock of shit and everyone knows it. They’ve been on the market for what, three or four years now? And I don’t know of anyone who’s ever gotten

squeezing it between his fingers. He was glad she didn't know about the small silver disc in Abigail Cater's purse. But he knew about it, and it was scrambling his logic to even admit the possibility.

"But," he began, and then changed his mind. He did his best to lay out the facts as he understood them, and to put them forward without making her feel silly. "So. You're convinced that Sam is somewhere busily making more commercials, and he's aiming them at you."

"That's right."

"Okay. So how many people in this city can possibly be making them? They come complete with all these graphics, all this CGI—they've got to be expensive, and they must require a lot of equipment."

She was almost smiling. "Yes, they do. It's becoming something of a cottage industry in bigger cities like New York and Los Angeles, and I've heard of maybe a dozen in Miami. But here, as far as I could find, there are only five producers who cater exclusively to the commercials."

"Wait. Exclusively?"

"Sometimes small movie studios will crank them out for extra money, but it's funny on their taxes so they usually do it under the table. There's no way to track that kind of thing. It's possible that the big video game companies might make them, but it's not likely." She reached one last time for the briefcase interior and withdrew a slip of lined paper with a list of names.

"And these people are...?"

"Producers. The only legitimate ones I could find within a hundred miles."

"You think he did this close to home?"

"I don't know. But it's somewhere to start." With a swift tuck and lift of her long, thin legs, she stood up. She locked the briefcase and offered her hand.

Leatus took it, and shook it.

She said, "I recommend that you check with these people and find out if anyone's seen him. Even if none of them know him, somebody might know of another producer somewhere—someone who'd be willing to make a commercial, well, like the kind that kills people."

"I'll do that," he promised.

"How can I reach you, if I need to talk to you again?"

She palmed a card into his hand. "Tomorrow I'll be taking one of the morning ferries out to Bainbridge for a client. Leave me a message if you need something, or if you learn something."

"I'll do that, too."

And as he watched her leave, weaving her tidy and smooth way through the maze of desks, he was already wondering how he was going to justify the time and legwork this was going to cost him.

When Gary returned to his neighboring desk, Leatus filled him in. He left out the part about Tara Henkle feeling threatened.

Gary whistled and folded his hands behind his head. His chair squeaked too. "Wouldn't that be a scream, eh? Video games and animation studios as digital virgins."

"What?"

"Isn't that Mary's job?"

Pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our deaths? Only now we pay other people to pray real pretty, and hope God rewards good advertising. That's fucked up."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," Leatus confessed. "But

yeah. It's fucked up." He fondled the list of names. They were all scrawled out in precise, tiny handwriting. "I've got to make a phone call."

"To who?"

"To the phone company. I want Abigail Cater's records."

Gary grinned. "What if Sam has a cell phone?"

"I'm not looking for his phone. I'm looking for Abigail's. I didn't find a cell in her purse, so she probably doesn't have one—and she had the disc with the prayer commercial on it, so she might've spoken to someone about it."

"Good point."

The phone records came back the next morning, and by then Leatus was prepared to recognize one of the recurring numbers. He pulled out the handwritten list of names and scanned it. With the help of the internet and a phone book, he'd attached contact information for everyone. And one of them, a woman named Phyllis Mayo, had received sixteen calls from Abigail Cater's home phone in the previous month.

Leatus reached for his desk phone and dialed the digits he'd written after her name.

"Thank you for calling Mayo Spiritual Productions, the source for all your prayer, meditation, and divine petitioning needs. We're unavailable to take your call right now, but if you leave a message after the tone, we'll be happy to contact you for a consultation or appointment. Thank you, and heaven bless you."

Back in the yellow pages, he found an address for Mayo Spiritual Productions. It operated out of a converted warehouse loft somewhere off the heart of Pioneer Square, which was encouraging. If

Leatus read the internet directions correctly, the office was only a few blocks away from where Abigail Cater was found so thoroughly cooked by lightning, or a cable, or God.

He grabbed his keys.

“Where you going?” Gary asked, setting down a fresh cup of coffee.

“Phyllis Mayo. Divine petitioner.”

“Count me in. I’ve got to see this woman.”

They reached the building despite the traffic, and parked in a government spot near the fire department headquarters. The building’s address didn’t match the streets very well, but that only meant that it was downtown Seattle and the search for the right building would be counterintuitive and time consuming.

Gary found the right one, around a corner with an unmarked street. A call box beside the door had a listing for MSP. He used his stubby fingertip to dial in the call, and a ringing on the other end was answered with the same voicemail as the one they reached when they’d called from the station.

But Leatus was fingering the door’s frame, where it was splintered and cracked. “Look at this,” he said. “Someone’s forced it.”

“Someone locked out?”

“Do we usually have that

kind of luck?”

Gary didn’t answer except to draw his gun and push his shoulder into the door. Leatus drew his weapon too, and braced himself for trouble when Gary’s weight busted the entrance. But nothing waited on the other side except for a semi-dark flight of stairs.

Leatus followed Gary as he

tall because the ceilings were unusually high. Leatus didn’t know what the building had been before its conversion to office space, but it had certainly been an industrial site. The walls were unfinished brick, and black ductwork formed mazes on the ceiling; all of it was poorly lit, and there were signs that the renovation was yet ongoing.

The fourth floor was identical to the previous three, and by the time the detectives reached it they were panting. Gary pushed against the door and it creaked open on painted iron springs that functioned as hinges.

Suite 436 had a door much like the one downstairs, solid looking but broken, with a splintered frame that indicated a smashed lock.

“Seattle Police. Open up,” Gary commanded, but no one answered so he knocked again and assumed a defensive position to the left of the door. Leatus took the right. “We’re coming in,” he informed the suite, and they crashed inside.

Phyllis Mayo’s office was packed from floor to ceiling with blocks of electronic equipment. Mismatched and random, the digital devices filled

half of the entry room and much of the side room, where a larger machine was parked on a large Ikea desk. In addition to the usual printer, tower, and monitor, there was an impressive collection of books about religious theory and statistical analysis, and a crate that held overstuffed hanging files.



scaled the steps sideways, quietly but swiftly—and pointing the gun around every corner. “What suite is she in?”

“436.”

“Three more floors of this?” He jerked his chin at a landing door labeled, “100-199.”

Each flight was obscenely

Gary made a gesture that said he was going to take the left half of the suite, and urged Leatus to take the right half.

Leatus wondered if maybe Gary wasn't psychic.

He almost tripped over her body, squishing one toe into a blood-soaked blackberry rug.

The room hadn't been trashed, exactly. It might have been naturally chaotic.

"In here," he announced as he crouched down beside the body.

She was white with black hair, and dressed like a graduate student in jeans and a casual sweater. Face-down. Whatever wound had killed her was located somewhere on her upper chest, if the half-dried puddle from her shoulders to her waist was any indicator. Under her right hand, a cell phone flashed that its battery was low.

Leatus pulled a disposable rubber glove out of his pocket and used it to lift the phone. It came off the rug with a sticky, sucking sound.

"Oh God," Gary said, ruefully and not with any real horror. He reached for his radio, but before he called the station he asked, "Speaking of God, you think He killed this one?"

"No telling." Leatus held the phone up to the light and frowned at it. "She was trying to send a text message."

"To who?"

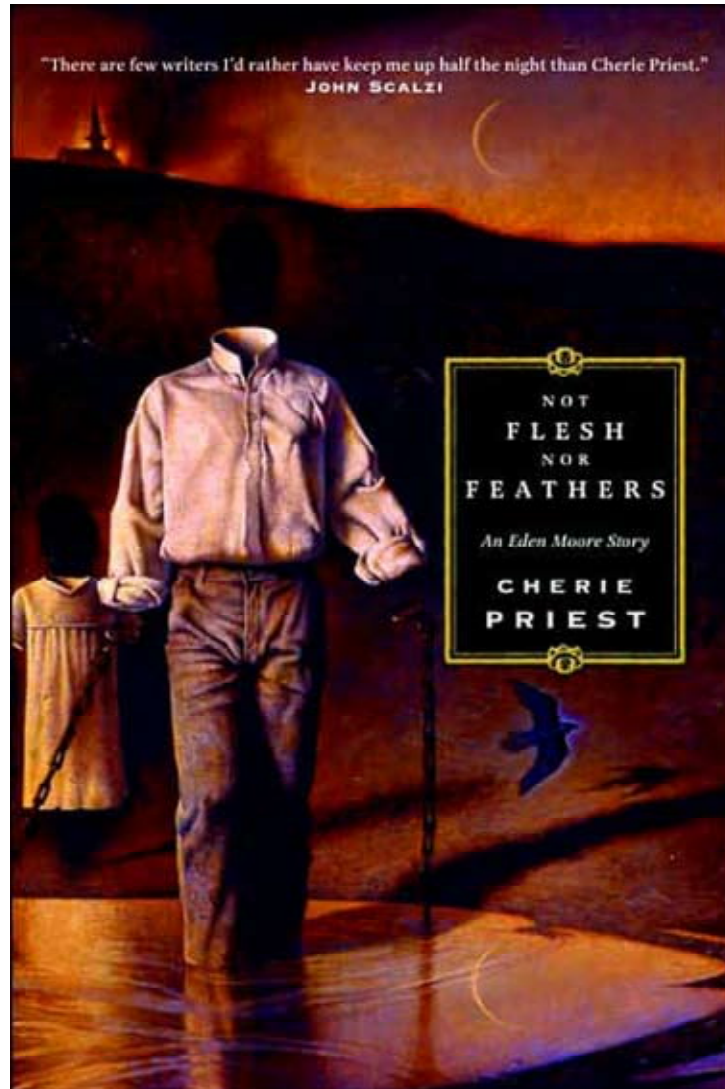
"Don't know. She didn't

get that far."

Gary crowded in close.

"What does it say?"

"Call it in," Leatus suggested, his voice suddenly, strikingly fast. "Call it in, get somebody here, and rope off the scene. We've got to go. I think I know who Sam's next target is, and I think I



know what he's praying for."

Back in the car, Leatus was driving wildly, flashing his lights and burning through traffic.

When they were on the road, he answered Gary's question. "It said, with a typo or two, 'Fear death by water.'"

"And you think you know where it was supposed to go?"

Leatus nodded. "Tara Henkle. And she's taking the Bainbridge ferry today. I don't know what time, but I've got to—here." He fished her business card out of his pocket and handed it to Gary, with his cell phone. "I drive. You dial."

He squinted at the card and poked the right digits.

"This is dumb as shit, Leatus. God's not going to kill this woman just because some greedy asshole asked him to."

"Why not? God kills perfectly nice people all the time."

"But not because..." Gary held the phone up against his ear.

"Give it back to me."

He did, and while Leatus listened to Tara's away message, Gary continued. "Not because someone pulls together a commercial."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know, I mean, nobody does."

"That's what I'm saying."

They reached the pier and hastily parked. The ferry was pulling up the gangplank, and even at a distance Leatus

convinced himself he saw a slim, suited shape that he recognized. "Ms. Henkle! Tara!" he shouted, but there was little chance of being heard. He ran along the walkways, taking the stairs two at a time and shoving his badge in front of him.

"Tara!" he called again, and the suited woman turned, and it was her after all.

She smiled at him, and waved.

She was still waving when the ferry bucked beneath her, jostled by some peculiar wave—a little tsunami—which made no sense at all there in the Sound. But the ferry kicked, and the people on the decks surged and shrieked. They clung to the rails and slapped their bodies against them, anything to keep from falling in the surge, retreat, surge of the water that shook the big craft and pounded the pier.

Tara Henkle was the first to fall. She toppled headlong, unbalanced by her heels or her surprise. The crash of her body, screaming and falling, was barely a blink of motion; and when the ferry settled down, Leatus was there at its edge.

He could see, before anyone could even point to it, that there was a place where something soft had been crushed between the dock and the hull. There was a smear of red, where the soft thing had burst, broken before it broke the surface.

Gary was yelling something, but Leatus didn't hear him.

Back at Phyllis Mayo's suite the body was gone. The suite had been taped off and the two detectives drifted through the interior, sifting through the hanging files and running their gloved fingertips through drawers, through books, and through bags.

Gary found a folder labeled "Stats" and he read from it aloud.

While he listened, Leatus slowed his work. He absorbed the numbers and finally, when Gary had run out of text, Leatus swallowed hard. "Where did she get that stuff?" he asked.

"University of Washington, some of it. Other schools. The

Vatican. And if even half these figures add up, she was on to something."

"But twenty-five percent? With a good enough commercial your shots of getting heard by the Man Upstairs is about one in four? You know there are those surveys out there, the ones that talk about the power of prayer, and how the results might be as high as one or two percent?"

"This isn't prayer," Gary said, and his voice was steady but his hands weren't.

"No, it's advertising! And if she was right, then a quarter of the time, it works—that's what gets me."

"Why? You don't like the idea that God answers prayers?"

"No, now that you mention it, I think I don't." Leatus rose from the floor where he'd been sitting, his knees covered in unanswered mail and receipts. "Not when people are praying for shit like this. I'd feel better knowing it was a crap shoot. I'd feel better thinking that the universe is a random thing, apathetic. The blind clockmaker ..."

"Calm down," Gary told him. "This isn't about that. Phyllis Mayo didn't die in a cosmic non-coincidence. She was stabbed to death, and that's no act of God."

"Maybe Sam was out of money. God is a bullet," he griped, quoting some song lyric that Gary recognized, but couldn't place. Leatus began to pace, scattering stray envelopes and grocery lists in his wake. "God is a bullet, and that would be better. There's a motive there, a cause and effect. There's a reason to it, even when that reason looks illogical. But this?" He flung a hand towards the folder that Gary was still holding. "This is

the undoing of it all. This is worse than random, it's worse than nothing. I can't do this," he swore.

"Can't do what?"

"This." Leatus pulled his badge out of his pocket and it fell from his hand onto the floor. He peeled himself out of his gun holster and dropped that, too. "I can't do this, if that's all it's going to come to. Like, like we're playing, pretending. Trying to impose order on earth, when there isn't any in heaven."

Staggering, he pushed past his partner and forced his way out the door, down the stairs, and down the subsequent stairs in their never-ending tripping pattern that made his ankles ache.

Outside it was gray, but neither stormy nor bright. No lightning, no sky. No weather at all.

And Tara Henkle was still falling. He was watching her tumble on an infinite loop, remembering the cascading flip of her arms and knees as the rail failed to hold her. And there was an old woman, struck by manmade lightning; and the smell of her flash-cooked corpse was stuck in the back of his throat.

"Murder is one thing," he muttered as he stumbled, angry and afraid. "But not this. No justice, no authority. No order and no recourse. Just another invisible system, corrupt and malicious."

Out on the sidewalk where Abigail Cater had died, there was a small shrine of flowers and a white wood cross the size of a kitten. Leatus kicked it as he passed. He scattered the tiny memorial with the edge of his shoe.

"Content to ignore, but capable of being bribed." NA



THE CHICKEN MAN

by Michael Laimo

Inside the holding pen, hell reigned.

One hundred degree heat and clouds of ammonia and fecal matter beat down upon Dave Richardson as he grabbed a chicken making a valiant bid for escape. For the millionth time he wondered if the chickens knew their fates had already been written. *Shit*, he thought. *If it weren't for Delmar, these chickens wouldn't even exist in the first place.*

Delmar created. Delmar laid down the law. And Delmar slaughtered.

He chased the chicken in a rambling circle, slipping in a thick patch of manure as he grabbed the thing around its genetically altered bulk. This one was as plump as they got! The chicken clucked up a frenzy, pecked furiously at Dave's hands and drew blood, adding to the fifteen years of battle wounds he'd accumulated. No pain registered. He'd lost all feeling in his hands years ago.

A pair of handlers followed close behind and retrieved the escapee. The man on the left, like his handler associate, did not speak

English and forced a smile as the chicken attempted another escape, feathers flying everywhere.

It was here that Dave reminded himself how lucky he was to have a job. Didn't matter that the place was rife with disease, filth, and rot. The damn immigrants were showing up by the truckloads and were willing to work for half the pay and barely any benefits, and that was all that mattered. They also wore industrial gloves and surgical masks, a commonsensical precaution not even considered fifteen years ago when Dave started working at the Delmar plant.

The Government had turned a blind eye long ago to these 'contract growers', as the corporation made certain that Uncle Sam's palm was well greased (and not just with chicken and turkey fat). Apparently the growling stomachs of the American consumer were paramount to the aches, pains,

and diseases of a few thousand illegals.

But what about me? he thought, wiping filthy sweat from his brow.

Dave was one of the unlucky ones who'd started working the slaughterhouse assembly line years ago. He began as a handler, gathering the chickens by the thousands (one at a clucking, scratching, poking, pissing, shitting time) and stuffing them into containers where they would be driven to the plant for processing.

Meet actor Eric Troy. Every woman's dream...and mankind's worst nightmare!



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He would handle approximately eight-thousand chickens a day, and had the scars to prove it, not just from the scratches and the biting, but also the disfiguring diseases he'd obtained from the feces and urine that'd seeped into his wounds. His hands had become a purple knot of scars, and as far as he was concerned weren't worth protecting with a pair of gloves. *It slows down production*, he'd once argued to plant supervisor Edwin Stroebecker, that good-for-nothing chicken-ass, who'd insisted that all new workers wear protective gear. *It lowers our insurance rates* was chicken-ass's reply, and he'd sent Dave on his merry way, brandishing that hideous gap-toothed grin of his, spitting tobacco juice in Dave's path.

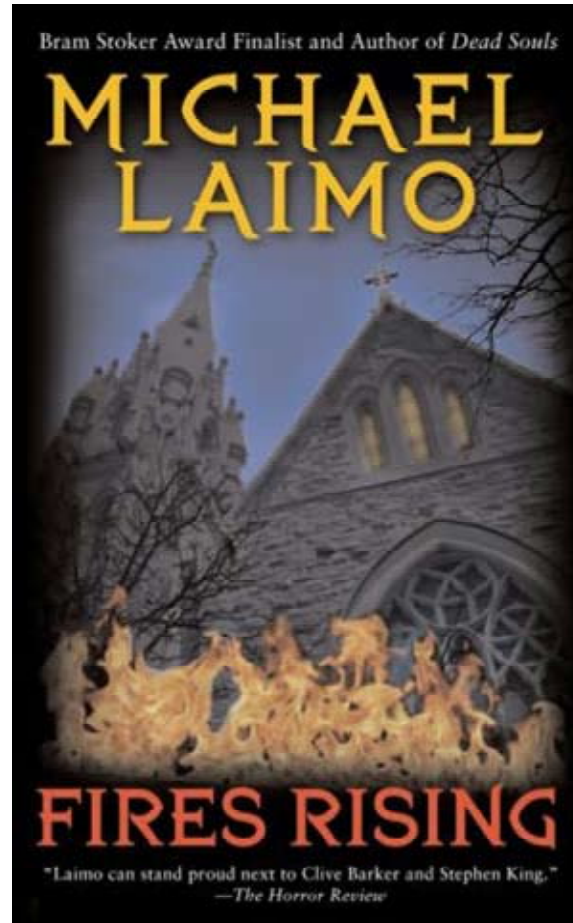
After two years on the job, Dave was promoted to the position of 'hanger'. For an additional eighty bucks a week, he'd spend two four-hour shifts fastening the feet of thirty birds a minute into metal shackles on a rolling conveyer. Bucking and thrashing, the chickens would travel twenty feet into another room where they were dipped into electrified water and consequently stunned.

Farther along, their dangling heads were efficiently lopped off by a razor sharp metal wire, but only if the bird was properly shocked. Sometimes the charge in the water wasn't turned up enough and the chickens came out of the water quite alive and conscious. The 'lopper' would then miss a lot of these chickens and slice across their breasts instead. Bleeding to death, these chickens were con-

sidered waste, and subsequently dumped.

In one eight hour shift, Delmar turned 150,000 live chickens into packages of ready-to-eat meat.

It was in his position of 'hanger' that Dave collected some additional injuries: two torn rotator cuffs from the repetitive movement of hanging chickens (one every two seconds, eight hours a day). More



cuts on his hands and arms; eye infections from feather dust and spraying urine; respiratory ailments that resulted in a daily routine of coughing up blood and brown hunks of lung.

After five years of hanging, Dave was promoted to foreman—the position with Delmar he held today. Not only was Dave earning more than twice the salary as those starting out as handlers or pen

cleaners, but he was also in charge of those working the eight hour shift he was on.

"Don't let any more of 'em git away," he told the handler, who smiled idiotically and nodded as he shoved the chicken into a container already holding three birds. The handler pressed against the caged door with his hip and squeezed it shut, crushing the head of the chicken he'd just captured.

As long as they were alive and properly stunned when they hit the lopper, then that's all that mattered.

The containers were carried from the truck into the slaughterhouse. The workers there joked amongst themselves in Spanish and many of the cages were tossed back and forth. Some of them were dropped. The chickens in them clucked in frantic protest.

"Dave! Git your sorry ass over here." Stroebecker. The supervisor marched across the killing floor, a half-eaten turkey leg clutched in his hand, grease coating his chapped lips and nicotine-stained moustache. His blood-stained tee-shirt, all too tight, divulged three inches of midsection that bulged over the hidden waistline of his jeans. Purple stretch marks zig-zagged their way around his enormous belly-button. Dave wondered if Stroebecker might be able to lay an egg from that cavernous opening in his gut.

Dave stepped through the sea of blood, feathers, and dust on the floor toward his boss. Stroebecker grabbed Dave by his thinning pony tail and led him toward the dropped cages.

"See that? That there's a dropped cage. Got three chickens

in there that ain't gonna end up on anyone's dinner table. Damn things are *broken*."

One of the handlers moved to grab the cage. Stroebecker released Dave's hair and handed his turkey leg to the handler, who used two gloved fingers to clutch Stroebecker's lunch. The blood and dust on the handler's glove didn't seem to phase anyone, Stroebecker included.

Dave pinched a brow and fixed his supervisor's blank gaze. The man, known to be a bit loose in the gears, had a crazed look about him today, not uncommon but disconcerting all the same. It was cyclical thing, this madness, a once-a-month uproar that usually kept the workers in line. Dave wasn't sure if there was a method to the super's madness, or if he had a loose gear upstairs spinning out of control.

You had to be a bit mad to work in this neck of the industry anyway, and Stroebecker fit the mold flawlessly.

Stroebecker leaned down, opened the dropped cage and pulled a chicken out by the leg. The bird flapped its wings frantically, sending up a cloud of brown dust. Urine and feces dripped down his forearm. "Well what do ya know. That there's a *good* one. Ain't nothing wrong with it far as I can see. You just got lucky Richardson."

As always, Stroebecker's once-a-month routine held up production, the point he presumably aimed to prove in no way worth the time wasted. The fat man carried the flapping chicken to the first of the hangar lines and hooked it up by the legs. In this position the chicken remained oddly still, as

though rumors of its fate had somehow seeped into its little brain. It clucked once and disappeared into the stunning room.

Beyond the empty shackles, three more hanging lines remained in production, and the workers there watched the supervisor's mad performance without pausing in the hanging of their load of chickens. Damn efficient immigrants could

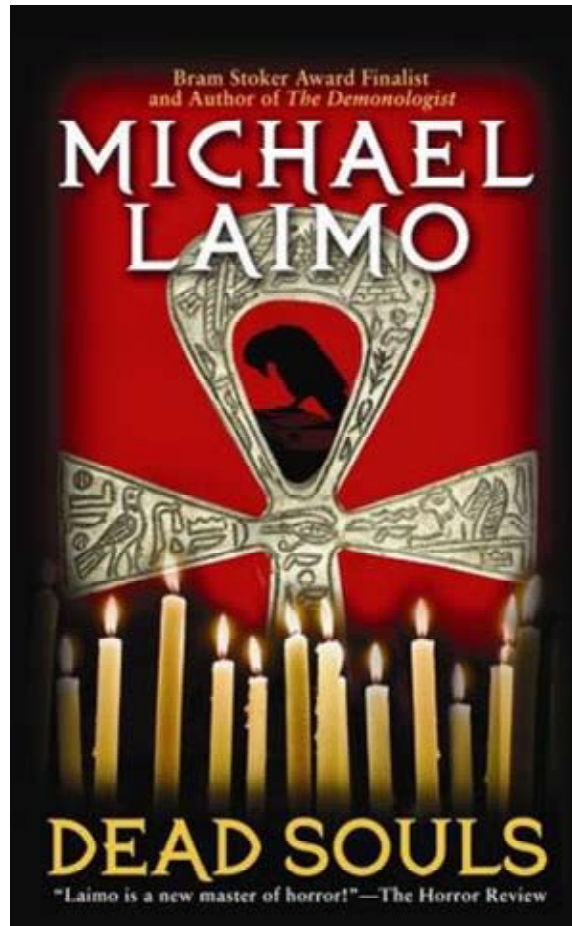
lifted from the killing floor. Some of these chickens, along with the soon-to-be-dead egg-layers, were sent off to a separate processing plant and used exclusively to manufacture nuggets and the like. The rest were swept up and either delivered to the local landfill or buried in the fields behind the plant. Dave had always thanked the good Lord above that he never had to do *that* job. Killing chickens was one thing. Burying the dead was another.

Stroebecker trudged back to the dropped cage, eyes fixed intensely on Dave. They'd never really gotten along, and Stroebecker made sure, at least once a week, to make Dave's life a bigger hell than it already was. Perhaps he'd been threatened by Dave in some oddly twisted way. Maybe he was simply out of his mind.

Stroebecker dug into the cage and yanked out another chicken. This one was unresponsive, limp in the supervisor's fat hand. Dave noticed some feathers stuck in the grease on his fingers.

"Now this one here's a dead chicken, Richardson." He held it up close to Dave's face. Its eyes were bulging from its head, ruptured and bleeding. A lump of a tongue, blue and jagged, swelled from its beak. "Know why its dead? Cuz you haven't been keeping tabs on your handlers. I saw with my very own eyes
...*your fat, beady, chicken-ass eyes*...

those men who are under your supervision tossing the cages from the trucks with you just standing there watching like a god-damned wart on my ass. And you and I both know that you can't be



do the job with their eyes closed if they had to.

Despite having been promoted to plant foreman, the raise in pay Dave had earned over the years couldn't keep up with the cost of living, and he was unable to escape the two-room trailer he'd lived in by himself since he turned eighteen. He'd earned just enough to pay the rent and buy some canned goods at Piggly-Wiggly to go along with the 'broken' chickens he'd

dropping the cages cuz that'll kill the chickens. And a dead chicken ain't worth nothing to the man upstairs. Get my drift?"

Dave nodded and took into account that all this standing around bullshitting about what he'd done wrong was cutting into Delmar's productivity much more than a few dead chickens did.

Stroebecker grabbed Dave by the pony tail again, the dark look in his eyes now glistening with a sheen of madness. "You gotta pay the price, douchebag."

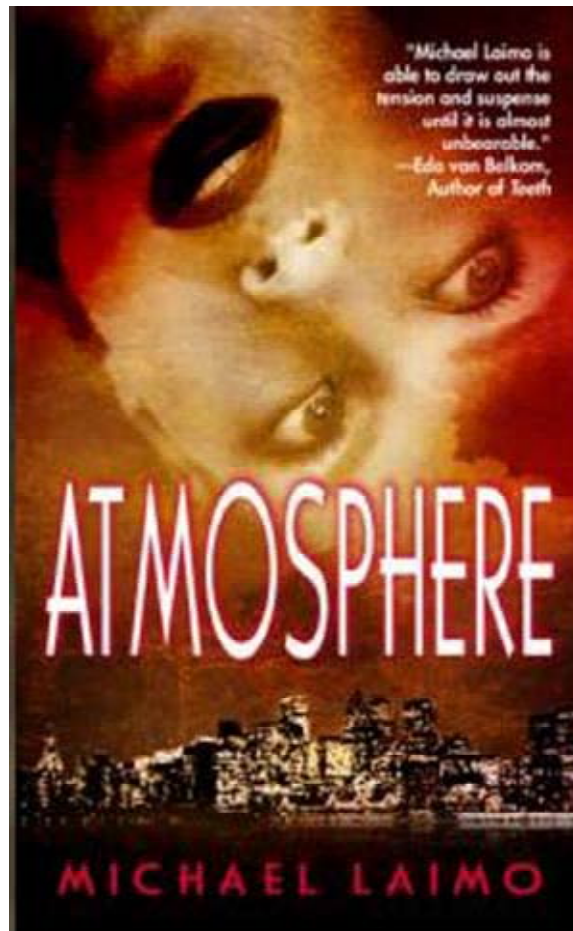
And it was here as Dave was tugged along the endless lines of inverted chickens that he realized just how far out of alignment Stroebecker's gears had shifted. The man had never gone this far, and the dark, empty look in his eyes made Dave realize how much trouble he was in.

There was a three-foot wide area between the wall and the fourth line of chickens where the workers would stand and make certain the birds were properly shackled. Stroebecker let go of Dave and shoved him against the wall. "Watch this," he said, wrapping a thick, meaty palm around a passing chicken's gut. He squeezed. The chicken clucked. He squeezed harder. The chicken clucked louder. Shaking his head and clearly not getting the results he wanted, Stroebecker fisted his other hand and shoved it inside the chicken. The bird made a noise that was part frenzied cluck, part scream of agony.

The super grinned crazily at Dave, and yanked out an egg.

Dave felt a tremor in his stomach. His heart pounded furiously,

striking at his chest wall. What was the man up to? Three nearby workers, their shift now interrupted by their supervisor, stood close by, perhaps wondering the same thing. Stroebecker took a step back and again grabbed Dave's ponytail. This time Dave found the means to fight back, offering up a weak and wholly inefficient



attempt to shove the fat man away. But Stroebecker had at least a hundred and fifty pounds on Dave, and leaned into him, pressing him against the wall. Dave wasn't going anywhere. And neither was Stroebecker.

Dave's breath escaped his lungs in a painful gasp. He twisted his head from side to side, but with no avail. Stroebecker's fat hand came over and down, right on top of Dave's head. The egg smashed with a muffled pop. Albumen and

yolk oozed down into Dave's eyes. He shuttered his lids as Stroebecker ground the egg into his hair.

Dave cried, "Damn it, what the hell are you *doing*?" He heard Stroebecker shouting something and when he opened his eyes saw three workers with their hands buried wrist-deep into the conveying chickens. The loud clucks from the chickens echoed Dave's slamming heart.

Stroebecker shouted, "Bombs away!"

After a moments hesitation, they pummeled Dave with the eggs. One hit him squarely in the face. Stroebecker guffawed and yelled, "Ten Points!" Another one hit Dave on the chest. The next one missed, hitting the wall behind him with a solid *crack*.

Stroebecker grabbed Dave's wrist and yanked it up the center of his back. Dave screamed out and shook his head back and forth, trying to blink the bits of cracked eggshell out of his eyes.

"More!" the fat super yelled. "He wants more! Dontchya Richardson?"

Dave squeezed his eyes shut, tried to move but was a prisoner to Stroebecker's weighty madness. The three workers, a sort of nutty glee shining in their eyes now, plucked eggs out of the passing chickens and hurled them at Dave. Stroebecker yelled at more workers and they immediately joined in on the frenzy. Eggs hit Dave in a seemingly never-ending succession, many in the face, some against his chest. In a few minutes he was completely sheered in raw egg and cracked shell.

All he could do is keep his eyes and mouth closed, and wait for the

madness to stop.

Finally, the eggs stopped coming. Dave used his free hand to wipe the gooey mess from his face, and opened his eyes. Stroebecker was leaning in close, horrible turkey-leg breath hot against Dave's wet cheeks.

"I've got a job for you Richardson. Come with me."

Stroebecker released Dave's wrist and grabbed him by the front of his wet shirt. All the dripping raw egg on him seemed not to phase the crazed supervisor. Not in the least.

And what Stroebecker did next made Dave wonder if he would survive the ordeal.

After the super screamed at the men to get back to work, he led Dave out into a storage room abutting the slaughterhouse. He shut the door behind him and shoved Dave against the wall, pressing his fat, sweating, stinking bulk against Dave's heaving chest. Dave gasped for air, the weight of the man's body too heavy to combat. Dave was smothered.

Stroebecker leaned close in to Dave, grinning through his yellow, greasy moustache, revealing the dark gaps between his yellow teeth.

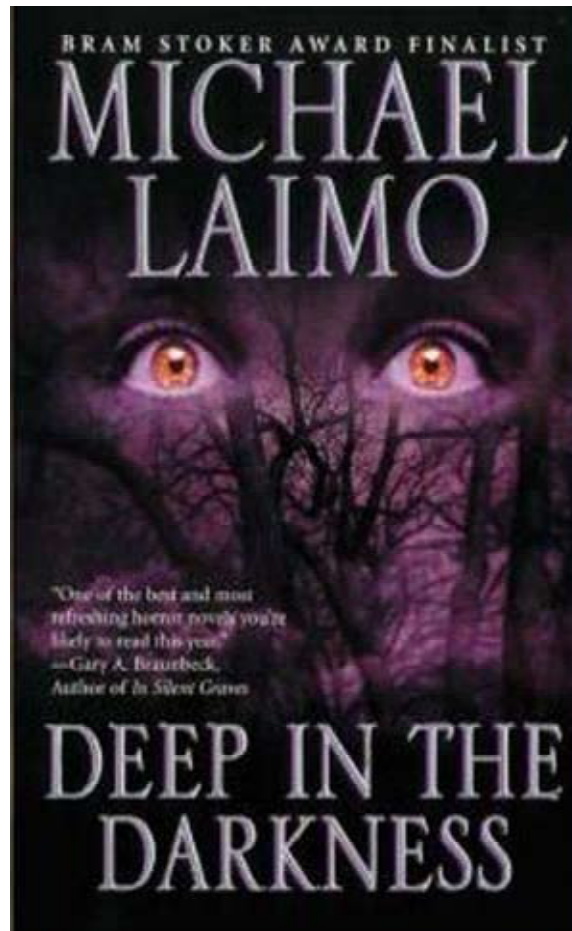
"I love eggs, Richardson. How about you?"

And with that, Stroebecker began licking the raw egg off of Dave's face.

In all of Dave's life and everything he'd ever seen in his years here at Delmar—the slaughters, the blood, the huge buckets of chicken heads, the dumpster full of rotting male chicks discarded because only the females were good for egg-laying—nothing could compare to having the hideously obese, horri-

ble smelling monster named Edwin Stroebecker licking raw egg off his face. He made every effort to shove the man away, but it was useless. Despite being nearly crushed, the oppressive heat in the building had sucked the strength and breath from him, virtually incapacitating him.

The man's tongue felt like



sandpaper, each lick like a stab from a knife in his heart, first his neck, his cheeks, his nose...and then ever so slowly moving up, all over his ears, licking...licking...licking all that raw egg from every inch of his face, moaning as he did so, and damn it to all hell if Dave didn't feel something rigid rising out through the layers of fat on Stroebecker's body, something pressing up against his own leg as the fat super flicked his tongue out against Dave's lips, making certain

to replace all the raw egg on his face with his horrible, warm saliva.

Dave wanted to scream, dear *god* how he wanted to scream, but was too scared to open his mouth should—heaven help us—the man decide to slip his tongue between Dave's parting lips.

So Dave screamed as best as he could with his lips sealed, and it would have been considered pretty loud if not for all the working machinery and the clucking chickens on the other side of the wall.

Stroebecker shoved his oppressive girth against Dave. Dave grunted painfully. So did Stroebecker. Tears filled Dave's eyes and ran down his cheeks as Stroebecker grabbed him, again, by the ponytail.

"C'mon Richardson..."

Winded, all Dave could do was follow the man's lead as he was led outside into the fields behind the factory.

The killing fields.

This was where the pipes in the slaughterhouse floors led. In addition to those chickens that died on the way to the slaughterhouse, millions of gallons of water were used at the end of the day to flush out the remains of a half million birds: over

1500 tons of guts, chicken heads, fat globules, feathers, and blood. All hosed down the huge drain at the east end of the slaughterhouse.

Dave had always wondered what happened to all the guts and feathers once they settled into the earth. Was it all absorbed into the ground? Did animals and bugs eat it all up?

He was about to find out.

Apparently all those chicken remains weren't as biodegradable as one might think. Or if it

was, it was simply too much for the earth's stomach to hold, and it saw no choice but to regurgitate it all back up for the world to see.

Their feet squelched in the soft muddy ground as they walked farther into the fields of weeds. The stench grew unbearable, assaulting Dave's nose and urging his gorge to rise. Flies by the thousands began to buzz about Dave, the sticky egg on his skin an unburied treasure for them to investigate. He shook his head, tried to pull away from Stroebecker's iron grip, but the big man grunted and plowed forward like a goddamned bulldozer, parting the waist-high weeds as he moved deeper into the killing fields.

The farther they moved in, the softer the ground became. Dave's feet sunk in to the ankles. The stench grew unbearable and he vomited down the front of his shirt.

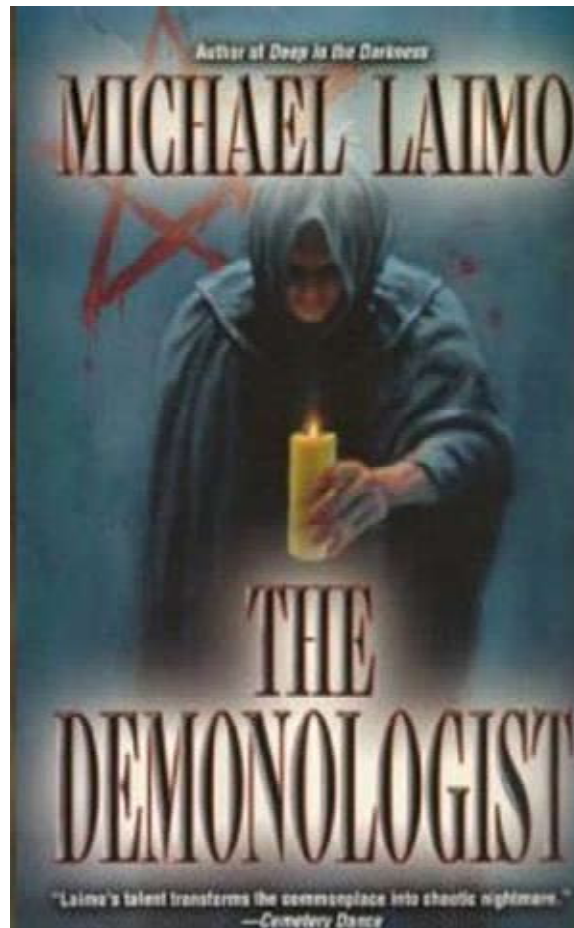
Stroebecker laughed. "Got a bit of a cleanup for you to take care of, Richardson." The weeds thinned, and they came upon a chain-link fence.

Dave lurched forward, the swollen fingers of his free hand clutching the fence for support. He stared ahead...and nearly dropped dead from the sight.

Here was the landfill. The place where the pipes from the slaughterhouse led. But there seemed to be a problem. It was overflowing with biological waste. All those years of hosing down the floors, flushing out the chicken heads and the guts and the feathers, the feces and urine. It was all here, a sea of it rotting for years in the center of a huge field instead of soaking into the earth, baking beneath the summer sun, a terrible

secret kept a hundred miles away from the closest community.

Stroebecker grabbed Dave and yanked him along the length of the fence. Weakened, Dave could barely fight back, much less keep up with the fat man. His legs tangled up as Stroebecker pulled up a torn section of fencing.



"Let's go Richardson." With his strong, meaty hand, Stroebecker shoved Dave through the opening. Dave clawed at the slimy ground, but to no good use.

He began slipping down. His shirt got snagged onto the fence and tore down the back. He managed to get two fingers latched around the fencing, but Stroebecker, a hideous glee shining in his eyes, kicked Dave's fingers, then shoved the fence forward and watched as Dave Richardson

slid down into the pool of chicken viscera and waste. Dave looked up, saw the swath his body left in the thick coating on the wall of the fill before he plopped through the coagulating surface of the pool.

He fought against it, screaming, crying, reaching his arms up but feeling himself being pulled away toward the center of the pool, as though there was an undertow in its depths...or a shark, or some other horrible monster latching onto him, embracing him like bait. He tried to swim, but the sludge was too thick. Feathers adhered to his body; skeletal chicken heads with their eyes gouged out staring up at him; beaks and claws poking at him as though they possessed lives of their own... as if somewhere deep beneath the pool of blood and guts there existed a power, a being, a sentient *thing* guiding the pool and its parts about Dave as though it was all an extension of its unnamable self.

Finding himself at the center of the pool, the fencing now twenty feet away on all sides, Dave stared back at Stroebecker, his outline plump in the sun's shadow, his girth bouncing up and down as he pointed and laughed at his nemesis, Dave Richardson, foreman for the Delmar Poultry factory. And as Dave eyed Stroebecker back with hatred, that fat chicken-ass *murderer*, he felt the power beneath him pulling him down...down...down, and saw the souls of a *billion* chickens surrounding him as the pool of viscera gurgled up over his head...

At five o'clock, the bell rang and the workers left their posts. Stroebecker saw through the

window in his office one of the immigrants making off with a live one lucky not to have met its fate with the lopper. Stroebecker had it in his mind to give the worker a piece of what he'd given that good-for-nothing Richardson, but for now let it slide. Richardson *had* to go, sooner than later. They guy was putting up some serious numbers, and the man upstairs was more than impressed with him at their interview last week. That meant Stroebecker's job was on the line—Delmar was making cuts by the dozens, and Dave had probably offered to do Stroebecker's job for less pay.

Sooner or later, Stroebecker would be toast.

But with Richardson now gone, Edwin Stroebecker's job was safe. For now. Until another foreman was called into headquarters. Then he'd have to keep very close tabs on the man.

He stayed late and caught up on the paperwork he fell behind on—*damn that Richardson!*—then went out on the killing floor to make certain the evening cleaners had properly flushed the floor.

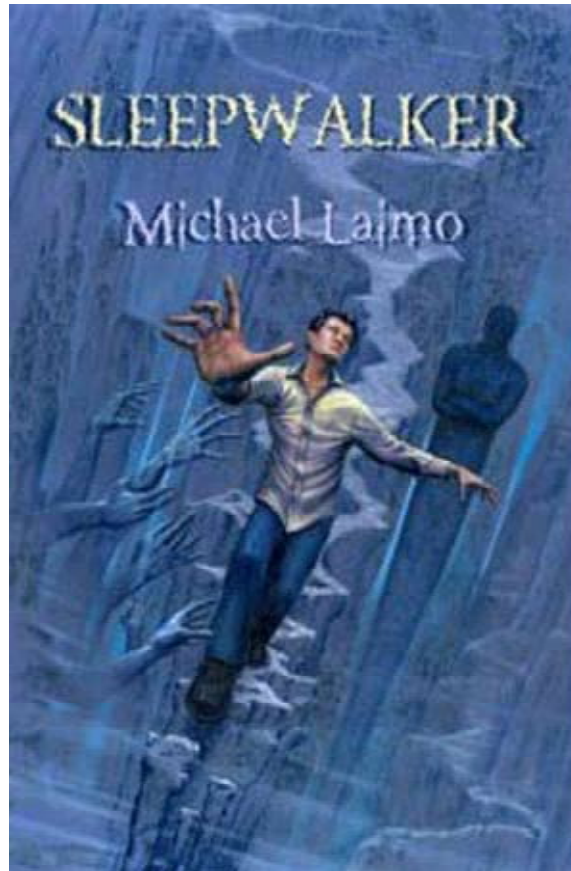
There was an explosion out in the factory.

The walls shook. Stroebecker lunged forward, his bulk jiggling as he made his way along the rows of shackles. He went into the boiler room, then past the dozen loppers, still bloodied from the day's work. A group of men plunged out of the room where all the innards were sprayed, where all the waste was sent into the killing fields. They were covered in muck. Black, bloody, filthy, stinking, lumpy muck.

"The pipe!" one of them

screamed in broken English. "Boom!"

The men, six of them, staggered past Stroebecker and didn't turn around to see the wave of thick waste tiding out of the room. It hit Stroebecker in the legs and surged up to his swollen gut, splashing him in the face as he fell back against the wall.



"Holy shit!" he screamed. "Somebody help me!"

The wave surged again, spilling out of the room, splattering against the walls, then towing back only to surge forward again, bringing with it more remains from the backed-up system. Another explosion shook the room. The tiles in the walls cracked. Dust rained down. The waste splashed up into Stroebecker's face, harder this time, seeping into his nose, his mouth, his eyes. He coughed and gagged, wiping his face furiously

with trembling hands. The wave surged back, and as it did he attempted to stand, but slipped back down, shoes unable to grab a firm hold on the flooded floor.

"*Bossssss...*" came a hideous voice from the waste room. Deep and gurgling. Invasive and determined in its dreadful tone.

Stroebecker gazed up... and through the dripping mask of filth on his face beheld a thing not born of this earth, a thing that stood manlike in the threshold of the room, but in its very existence was more... *chicken* than human. It was covered with filthy rotting feathers, only a small portion of them at its swollen breast retaining the white hue they once held. The rest were black and brown, withered and stained with blood and sewage. Its legs were tendon thin, devoid of anything resembling human flesh, the bones now bound with a multitude of chicken claws, thousands of them united in a bid for muscular balance and strength.

Stroebecker pressed back against the wall, staring now at the thing's face...a visage composed of rotting chicken heads gathered from the place from which it just came: beaks lined and piled in the place where human lips should have been, poking out six or more inches into a single moving bill that clucked a deeply hideous sound not born of human nor fowl; its eyes, now multifaceted orbs composed of the eviscerated eyes of a hundred or more chickens, each rolling as one; and the rest of its face, doused with decaying feathers and dark patches of grainy skin.

And yet, despite the hor-

rible deformity and freakishness of the monster before him, it still held on to the human features that were once its own, that were once Dave Richardson's.

It opened its beak composed of beaks, and growled, "Bosssss..."

"Oh dear god, help me..." Stroebecker uttered, sliding along the length of the wall, through the pool of blood and waste on the floor.

The chicken man leapt forward, clucking in its horrible deep tone, its tongue, blue yet shockingly human, spilling from its mouth and dripping a thick runner of saliva. Stroebecker screamed as the thing sunk its newly formed talons into his thighs.

Peering down at him with its terrible chicken face—Stroebecker could see the gruesome detail of the chicken heads carpeting the top of its skull, as if they had somehow been sewn together—the chicken man spread its wings, showing amid its splay of rotting feathers two purple-knotted human hands at the very ends of its wings.

The chicken man clucked...and with alarming speed shoved a scarred hand deep into Stroebecker's exposed belly-button. Stroebecker's breath escaped him, replaced now with an all-consuming wave of agony as the chicken man's hand disappeared into his hefty flesh. It dug deep down, leaning forward with all its weight as its groping, tearing fingers prodded and searched.

Its beak open and from within gurgled out, "Noooo eggggg heeere..."

It pulled its hand out, trail-

ing out a rope of intestine ringed about two if its knotted fingers. Using the intestine as a leash, it splashed through the pool of waste, pulling Stroebecker with it. The fat super flailed through the pool, the agony twisting through his body as he was dragged into the hanging room nearly stealing his consciousness.

"No, dear Jesus, no!"



And as he was dragged away by the chicken man, he could peer only at the swath of blood his body was leaving behind, first floating upon the surface of the waste, then on the damp floor as the pool thinned out.

Now, below the shackles, his blood gathered in a dark pool.

The chicken man yanked Stroebecker up with surprising strength and shackled him up by the toes. Stroebecker bucked and thrashed as much as he could, but his near-dead weight and gushing

injury was too much for him to combat, and he fell nearly motionless with the top of his head pressed against the floor and his blood flowing across his torso, into his face.

The shackles began to move. Stroebecker could see the chicken man's clawed feet dart by as the shackles moved him into the boiler room. His head banged against the side of the electrified pot of water. The shackles pulled him forward, a severe pain now registering in his toes as the bones were dislocated. He flipped up and over the side of the pot into the electrified water. Volts darted through his body. But what was enough to stun a chicken merely tickled a man of nearly three-hundred pounds. He emerged choking, but still conscious, his line of sight following...

Oh my God...

The chicken man had never let go of his intestine. It had come out of the hole in his navel like string from a party favor, at least thirty feet of it trailing back into the last room.

Life was escaping Edwin Stroebecker, and finally he was finally stunned as the chickens were...or were supposed to be when the lopper took off their heads.

But, as he'd known, those that weren't proper stunned moved around too much, and the lopper would slice through someplace other than their necks, like their breasts.

Or if you were Edwin Stroebecker, just below the knees.

The last two things Edwin Stroebecker heard before he died were the sound of his legless body thumping to the floor, and the

sound of the chicken man clucking with laughter.

The workers arrived the next morning to find quite a mess. Their supervisor hadn't arrived for work yet, and neither did their foreman. They looked around, unsure of what to do. There was a delivery scheduled in an hour, and the cleanup crew apparently hadn't done their job last night. There was blood everywhere, and a horrible smell coming from out back.

"Over here, guys."

The workers followed the voice into the hanging room. There was more blood on the floor here, and a whole pile of what appeared to be chicken guts beneath the lopper.

"Seems as though the drainage system backed up."

The workers turned and saw Dave Richardson standing in the doorway.

"What happened?" one of the workers asked.

Dave eyed the workers intensely. "Every now and then someone tries to hose a whole chicken down the drain. Seems like a real big one got caught."

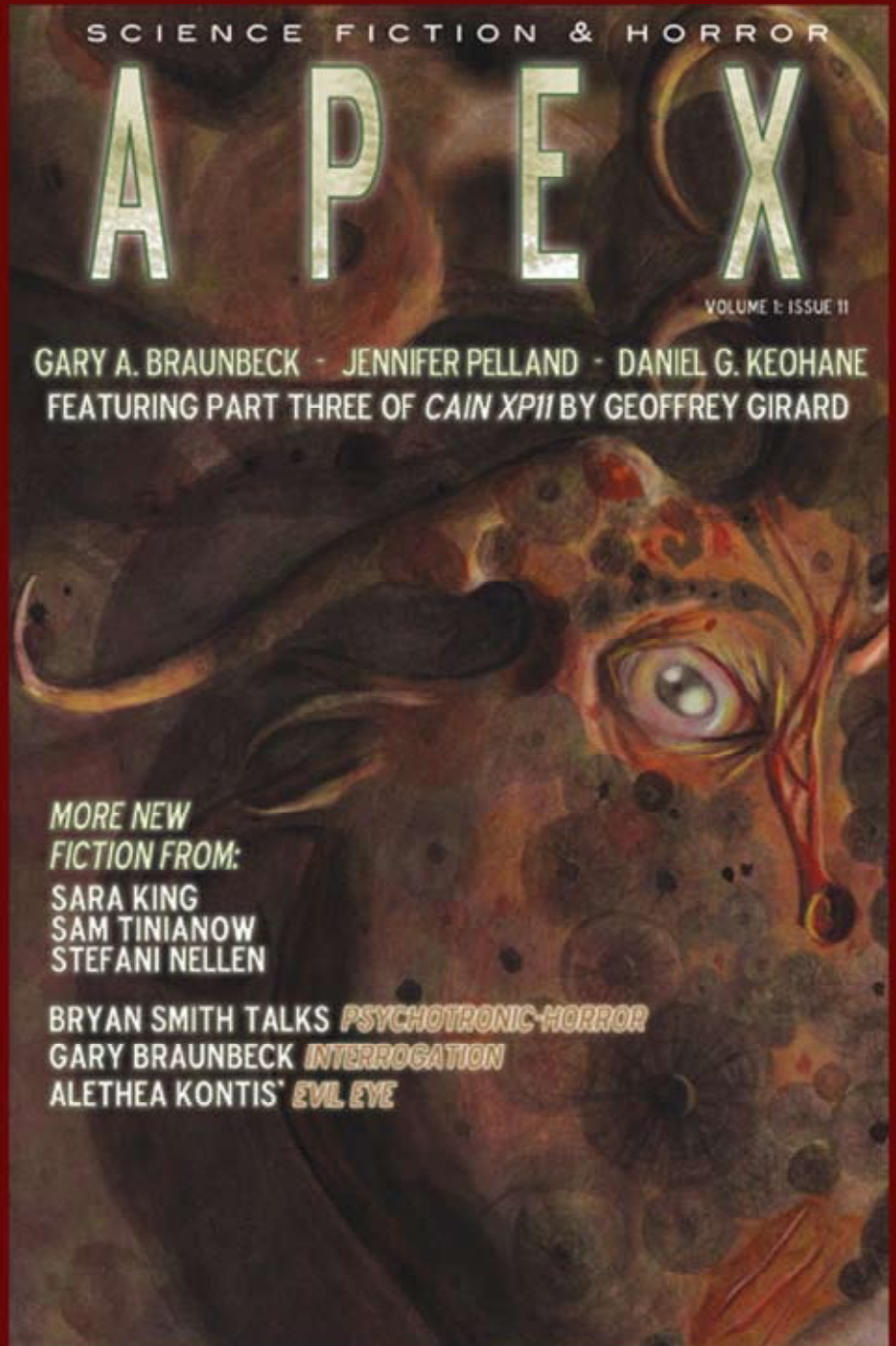
Dave peered down at the pile of guts. Peeking out amid the viscera and feathers was a human eye. Dave used the toe of his boot—a boot that barely held the claw hiding it—to shove the guts over it.

"I'm the new super here," Dave said. "Let's get this mess cleaned up before the truck gets here."

The men nodded and got right to work.

And Dave went to his new office, scratching the itch on his back—*damn feathers*—that wouldn't go away. **NA**

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No More Shadows

by Tim Waggoner

Daniel was making his third trip around the parking lot of Electronixx (the Hi-Tech Superstore with More) when his cell phone rang. He didn't feel like talking to anyone – and there was only one person it could be this time of night – but after the fifth ring, just when the phone was about to switch over to voice mail, he snatched it up from the passenger seat and answered.

"Hi, Dan. I hate to bug you again, but I was wondering if you had a chance to pop that check in the mail yet. Lindsey needs a new winter coat, and she has an orthodontist appointment on Monday."

"I get paid tomorrow, Angie." As if she didn't know that. "I'll be able to write you a check then." He paused, not wanting to say the next words, unable to stop himself. "I could come by the house after work and drop it off. If you want."

Her reply came without hesitation. "Thanks, but we're going up to Akron to visit my sister this weekend. We'll be leaving as soon as Lindsey gets out of school tomorrow. Just go ahead and mail the check if you don't mind." No warmth in her voice, all business.

"Yeah, sure." He neared the parking lot's exit, thought about leaving. Instead he turned and began his fourth circuit.

"Are you out somewhere?"

Sounds like you're driving."

"Just running a couple errands."

"At ten o'clock at night?"

He shrugged, although there was no one to see the gesture. "Got nothing better to do." And wasn't that the sad truth. Even sadder was the fact that his "errands" consisted of driving aimlessly around town, exploring side streets, circling parking lots, driving just to drive, staying out so he wouldn't have to spend any more time than necessary in his crappy one-bedroom apartment. This was his nightly routine, had been ever since he'd moved out of the house two months ago.

"I'd think a lot of stores would be closed by now." An edge of suspicion in her voice, and the subtext of her words was clear: *What are you doing spending money on yourself when you owe your daughter and me a check?*

He wasn't out shopping, hadn't stopped anywhere except at a Burrito Bungalow for dinner, but he resisted the urge to defend himself. He knew it would only end up with the two of them arguing.

"Can I say goodnight to Lindsey?"

"She's already in bed. Sorry."

He doubted Lindsey was asleep. She always read for a half hour or so before turning off the light and snuggling beneath the covers. When she'd been younger

– and not so much younger, at that – he'd read stories to her. Only a couple months ago, he'd been the one to check on her and remind her that she needed to turn out the light and get to sleep. Now he was a man who wrote checks to her mother and only saw his daughter every other weekend.

"I just want to say goodnight to her, Angie. I . . ." *Just want to hear her voice*, he finished silently. Just want to remember that I'm her daddy. *That I used to be someone.*

Angie was quiet for several seconds, and he thought she was on the verge of relenting, but before she could speak a short, rail-thin man ran stumbling into the glare of his headlights. Daniel only had enough time to register fragmentary images: a terror-stricken pale face, small round glasses, short blond hair, stubby fingers on the end of flailing hands, right leg twisted at an awkward angle, the limb in danger of buckling any second despite the man's small frame. Daniel dropped his cell, jammed his foot down on the brake pedal of his Jeep Cherokee, and yanked the steering wheel to the left. The vehicle had been traveling less than 20 mph, and his tires gave only a short squeal of protest before the Jeep came to a stop.

Daniel sat gripping the steering wheel with both hands, breath trapped in his throat, heart hammering in his ears. No thump,

he told himself. No scream. That meant he hadn't hit the guy. The adrenaline-rush of fear gave way to relief, but that emotion was in turn obliterated by a surge of anger. What the fuck had that stupid sonofabitch been thinking? It was ten o'clock on a Thursday night, closing time for Electronixx, and while the parking lot was half empty, that meant it was also half full. If Daniel had been traveling any faster, he might've slammed into a parked car when he veered to miss the small man. As it was, only sheer luck had kept him from hitting another vehicle; the Cherokee's front bumper had edged into an empty space right next to a pickup. If he'd been a little slower on the brake . . .

Daniel put the Jeep in park and searched for his cell phone. He found it lying on the floor on the passenger side, and he undid his seatbelt and leaned down to pick it up. As he straightened in his seat he put the phone to his ear, spoke Angie's name twice, but there was no reply. Either the call had been dropped or she'd disconnected. He tossed the phone onto the passenger seat, his disappointment over not getting to talk to Lindsey replaced by anger. He yanked the key out of the ignition, and practically jumped out of the car. He started yelling before he even saw the man.

"Are you crazy? Didn't you see me coming?" A voice in the back of his mind said that he should be checking on the man to make sure he wasn't hurt, and while Daniel felt a twinge of guilt for letting his anger get the better of him, he continued shouting. "Jesus Christ, you could've been killed, or at the very least caused me to wreck!"

During his tirade, Daniel

had walked around the back of the Cherokee, intending to confront the small man. He'd forgotten to turn off the Jeep's headlights before getting out of the vehicle, but they were angled off to the side now, and they no longer illuminated the section of the parking lot where the man had been. But there were plenty of light poles stationed at regular intervals throughout the lot, giving off more than enough fluorescence for Daniel to see. It was early November in Southwest Ohio, which meant cold and wet. It had been spitting rain on and off all evening, and a scattering of glistening black leaves were plastered to the asphalt like insects with strange flat carapaces. The small man – he couldn't have been much over five foot – stood almost directly beneath one of the parking lot lights, the fluorescent glow washing him in ghostly blue-white. Now that Daniel got a good look at him, he could see that the man wore a blue windbreaker far too thin for the weather, jeans, and tennis shoes. Daniel's own leather jacket and slacks were only slightly more appropriate for the temperature, but then he hadn't expected to do much walking around tonight.

Despite the fact Daniel had been railing at the man, he wasn't looking in Daniel's direction. Indeed, he showed no sign that he was even aware that he'd almost been hit by Daniel's Cherokee. He kept turning his head as if searching for something, his feet shuffling back and forth in constant movement, as if he were desperate to keep running but unable to decide which direction to go. Daniel's anger ebbed as he realized the man was probably crazy, and he was about to turn around and head back to his vehicle when the man's gaze

finally fixed on him, and his panic-stricken eyes widened even further. Not in fear this time, but recognition.

"Daniel? Daniel Symons?"

Daniel was so surprised to hear his name come from the man's lips that for a moment all he could do was stand and stare. And it was in that moment that Daniel realized who the short man in the blue windbreaker was.

"Billy Wallace? Is that you?"

The relief that washed over the man's – over Billy's – face was so sudden it was borderline comical. Billy rushed up to Daniel and gripped him by the shoulders, eyes wide, mouth stretched into an almost maniacal grin.

"My god, am I glad to see you! You gotta help me, Dan! They're after me!"

Too many conflicting thoughts and emotions roiled in Daniel's mind, preventing him from answering right away. He had no doubt that the terrified man standing in front of him, fingers digging almost painfully into his skin, was Billy Wallace. Daniel hadn't seen him since high school, over twenty years ago now, but aside from some wrinkles around the eyes and a hairline that wasn't receding so much as rapidly retreating, Billy looked little different than he had then. Seeing him here, in the middle of Electronixx's parking lot on a cold November night was weird enough, but the basic situation was so eerily similar to the last time Daniel had seen him that he was gripped by an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*, one so powerful that for a moment he wondered if he might be dreaming. But then Billy squeezed his shoulders more tightly, and Daniel imagined his

fingernails might cut through his jacket's leather. No dream, then. The sensations were too real.

Billy leaned in closer and gave Daniel's shoulders a shake to emphasize his next words. "You gotta get me out of here before they catch up to me!"

Billy's breath, unfortunately, was just as real as his grip. Redolent of days-old coffee and stale cigarettes, it made Daniel's gorge rise, and he had to swallow once before he could speak.

"What the hell are you talking about? There's no . . ."

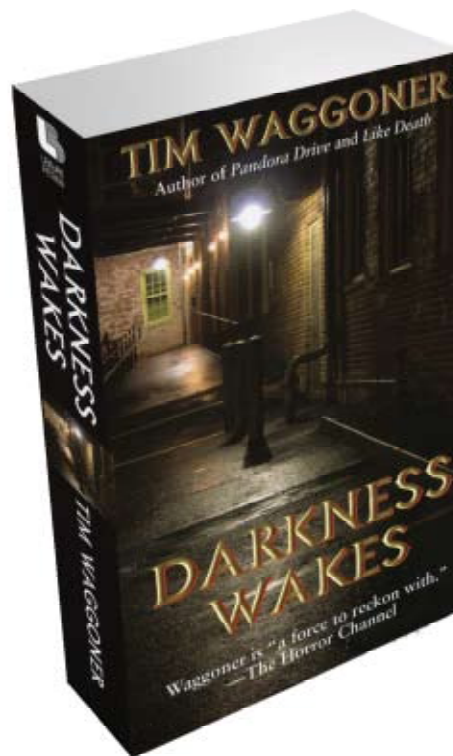
Daniel's words died as he looked past Billy – over the top of his head, really – and saw a quartet of shadowy figures approaching from just beyond the pool of fluorescence in which Billy stood. They were tall, even taller than Daniel who stood over six feet, and thinner than Billy, almost cadaverously so. They moved slowly, their steps measured and deliberate, and if it hadn't been for the echo of their feet on the wet asphalt – soft plapping sounds, as if they wore swim fins – Daniel might've thought them nothing more than an illusion created by a combination of the night's gloom and exposure to Billy's wild paranoia.

Billy released Daniel's shoulders, took hold of his left arm, and started pulling him toward the Cherokee. "We need to leave – *now!*"

Maybe it was due to seeing Billy again in such strange circumstances, or maybe it was the atavistic crawling sensation on the back of his neck that told Daniel he was shit deep in trouble. But whatever the reason, he didn't question Billy. He started running for the Cherokee, digging in his pocket for the

keys, praying they'd reach the vehicle in time, but in time for what, he wasn't certain.

Daniel jumped into the vehicle and yanked the door shut behind him. He jammed the key into the ignition as Billy opened the passenger door and frantically climbed inside. Through the open door Daniel caught a momentary



glimpse of four dark figures approaching the Cherokee, a sight that was thankfully cut off as Billy slammed the car door. Daniel turned the key, resisting the urge to look past Billy out the passenger side window to monitor the shadowmen's progress. He didn't need to see them to know they were coming.

The Cherokee's engine growled to life, and Daniel put the transmission into reverse and stomped on the gas pedal. The vehicle swerved backward, and Daniel immediately stepped on the brake to keep from smashing into a parked Saturn behind him. The

headlight beams swung around to shine on the shadowmen, and Daniel experienced a surge of irrational hope that the illumination would burn the dark figures out of existence like true shadows. But instead of dispelling the shadowmen, the glare from the headlights horribly accentuated their forms, revealing them to be man-shaped blobs of darkness, the surface of their bodies shiny-slick, like wet sealskin. Daniel saw no eyes, ears, or mouths, but he had no doubt the creatures could sense them and, though he saw nothing specific on which to base this conclusion, there was something about the inexorable way the four continued toward the Cherokee that made them seem *hungry*.

"Go, go, GO!" Billy shouted, and his words goaded Daniel into action. He put the Cherokee in drive and pressed down on the accelerator. Back tires squealed on wet pavement, and the rear end of the vehicle fishtailed before the Cherokee straightened out and roared forward. The shadowmen didn't move at first, and Daniel thought they might hit the damned things, but the dark quartet stepped aside at the last minute – two moving to the right, two to the left – and the Cherokee passed between them without difficulty. Daniel steered for the parking lot's exit, and though he told himself not to, he couldn't keep from looking in the rearview mirror. The shadowmen were there, of course, haloed by fluorescent light, standing motionless, watching as Daniel drove away, taking Billy with him. And then Daniel pulled the Cherokee onto the street and accelerated, determined to put as much distance between himself and Electronixx as possible.

They drove several moments in silence, moving at a good clip through Ash Creek's newly refurbished commercial district, past shopping centers, discount jewelers, upscale coffee shops, and restaurants struggling to look as if they weren't only a step or two above fast food joints. Daniel tried several times to ask Billy what the holy hell those shadow creatures were and what the fuckers wanted, but he couldn't bring himself to speak. He wondered if he might be in shock, but he decided that if he was, that was okay. Fine and dandy, as a matter of fact. He didn't think he was ready to know what the shadowmen were yet, and what's more, he wasn't sure he'd ever be ready. And that was cool. Copacetic, as they used to say in the sixties. Just as long as he never had to see the goddamned things again.

It was Billy who broke the silence first.

"Sure was lucky you came along when you did. I owe you my life, man."

Daniel's first thought was *Who says "man" anymore?* But then who was he to talk? He'd just used the word *copacetic* a couple minutes ago, hadn't he? *Least I didn't say it out loud.*

"I don't know if I'd call it luck," Daniel said, surprised to hear his own voice, and even more surprised by how calm he sounded. "I was just out . . . shopping." He didn't want to admit the real reason he was driving around Electronixx's parking lot.

"Didn't find anything, huh?" Billy said, and when Daniel didn't reply, he added, "The back-seat's empty."

Daniel thought about making some excuse to explain his lack of purchases, but he couldn't think

of anything, so he just kept his mouth shut and continued driving.

"Lucky for me, anyway," Billy said. "Just like that one day back in high school, right? 'cept this time turned out a hell of a lot better." Billy turned toward him, his eyes seeming to gleam in the dim illumination of the dashboard lights. "Kind of weird, huh?" His lips toyed with a smile, revealing teeth in dire need of a dentist's attention. There was something about that almost-smile that disturbed Daniel, a kind of sly knowing that belied Billy's words, as if the man was making fun of him for some reason.

Now that Daniel had the chance to observe Billy up close, he noticed other odd details. The man's hair was so short it was almost a buzz-cut, and his scalp had several bare patches dotted with scabs, as if he'd cut his own hair with an electric razor and done a piss-poor job. The cuffs of his windbreaker were frayed, his jeans were splotted with stains, and only one of his tennis shoes had strings. And then there was the smell . . . not just his coffee-and-cigs breath, though that was bad enough in these close quarters. The ripe-sour stink of a body that hadn't been washed in Christ only knew how long wafted forth from Billy like some olfactory version of radiation. It was so bad Daniel imagined his nose hairs shriveling up with each inhalation. He had no idea what had happened to Billy after high school, but now he wondered if the man was homeless. He sure as shit smelled like he was.

Homeless and chased through a parking lot by four shadow monsters, Daniel reminded himself. Wouldn't do to forget that little tidbit.

"You probably don't even remember that day, do you?" Billy said. "I'll never forget it, though. It was sophomore year, and we were in same gym class. With Mr. Briggs, remember? The guy was so fat he couldn't walk more than three steps without pausing to catch his breath. Some example of physical fitness. We weren't doing anything special; it was just open gym time, and the girls were playing basketball at one end of the gym, the boys at the other. I was picked last for a team . . . I always was."

Daniel felt an urge to say something to make Billy feel better, tell him that he hadn't always been the last to be picked, and even if he had, he'd been a decent player. But the truth was that Billy sucked big-time at sports. He'd always been short, skinny, and uncoordinated, but adolescence – instead of granting him height, muscles, and a deeper voice – had instead robbed him of what little grace he'd possessed. The other boys had joked that Billy was the only person they knew who could trip while standing still, and the sad part was it hadn't been much of an exaggeration.

"We were on the same team that day, though you probably don't remember that either, do you? Things went like they usually did for me back then. No one passed the ball to me, and I got a lot of 'intentional fouls,' which meant I got shoved around, punched in the arm, and knocked down."

Billy was right. Daniel didn't remember the details of that particular game, but then he didn't really need to in order to envision the scene Billy was trying to paint for him. Variations on it had been common enough in the gym, on the playground, and after school as far back as Daniel could remember.

For some reason, there was always a scapegoat in school, a sineater whose only purpose in life was to take shit from the other kids. Back in the day, it had been Billy Wallace's great misfortune to be elected King of the Shiteaters for Ash Creek High School.

Billy went on. "It wasn't so bad, I suppose. I mean, I didn't get a bloody nose or anything. I figured the worst I'd end up with was some nasty bruises, and I was used to that, so no big deal." Billy fell silent and turned his head to look out the passenger window. They had reached the end of the commercial district and were now traveling down the tree-lined streets of a suburban neighborhood. Mounds of sodden leaves were piled next to the curbs by those residents industrious enough to get an early start on their autumn lawn work. Daniel had once had a yard, and he'd hated dealing with the leaves every fall, even with the aid of a leaf blower. Now he'd give anything to have a home with a lawn that needed tending instead of his cramped, lonely crackerbox of an apartment that needed nothing from him and gave it back in equal measure.

Daniel knew where Billy's story was heading, and it wasn't territory he wanted to revisit, especially right now. He'd recovered enough from the encounter with the shadowmen to finally talk about them, and he thought that subject was a wee bit more important at the moment.

"What were those things back there? Why were they after you?"

Billy didn't answer right away, and Daniel thought maybe he was so lost in his memories that he hadn't heard. That, or maybe he

was in shock, too. After all, he was the one the damned things had been chasing. Daniel was about to repeat his questions when Billy spoke once again.

"It was a different story in the locker room, though. Mr. Briggs might've been a lazy fast-ass, but he only tolerated bullying in his gym up to a point. He never came in the locker room, though, so in there, anything went. A few of the boys – Chris Milligan, Bob Lewis, and Douglas Sanderson – started ragging on me for losing the game for them, whip-cracking their towels on my ass. It sucked, but I could handle it. But then their taunts began to turn ugly, and the anger on their faces became hatred. They made a circle around me and started pushing me back and forth between them, like I was some kind of exercise ball or something. Then they started hitting instead of pushing. Hitting hard. The other boys gathered round and started laughing, cheering them on, yelling for them to hit me even harder . . ."

Daniel felt a cold prickly sensation in his gut that had nothing to do with the shadowmen and everything to do with Billy's story.

He had to swallow twice before he was able to speak. "It was a long time ago, Billy."

Billy turned away from the passenger window to face Daniel once more. "Not so long as you think." Then lower, almost a whisper. "Not for me. You were there too, watching with the others, but you didn't laugh or cheer. Do you remember what you did?" Billy rushed on before Daniel could answer. "You told them to stop it and leave me alone."

Daniel remembered. How could he not? He also remembered what had happened next, and that

was something he didn't want to think about right then. So he was almost relieved when he glanced up at the rearview mirror and saw a dark shape framed there. At first he thought it was a car running with its lights off, but while it had the general shape of a car, there was something profoundly wrong about it. The edges were too rounded, the proportions uneven, and there was a lack of clearly distinguishable surface details. No dividing line between windshield and metal, no wipers, no visible headlights, no front bumper, and – worst of all – no engine noise. The vehicle, whatever it was, moved swift and silent, and it was right on their ass, the dark machine so close it might as well have been welded to the Cherokee. Daniel knew who rode inside.

"They've found us."

Billy spun around in his seat and looked out the back. "Fuck!" He faced forward and looked out the windshield. "How close are we to the edge of town?"

Daniel couldn't take his gaze off the rearview mirror and the shadowy mass shaped into a crude approximation of a vehicle filling the glass. "About a mile, maybe."

"Head for the country. Once we hit a good long stretch of road we can go fast enough to lose them."

"What makes you so god-damned certain we can outrun the fuckers?" Daniel demanded.

"I've been dealing with them for a while now. They're scary as shit and dangerous as hell, but they're not all-powerful. Trust me."

Everything had gotten strange so fast that Daniel hadn't had the opportunity – let alone the

capacity – to think rationally. But he decided to do as Billy said. The man seemed to know what he was talking about, and besides, it wasn't as if Daniel had any brilliant ideas on how to escape the shadowmen.

The suburbs of Ash Creek soon gave way to weathered-gray telephone poles and cornfields bordered by rusty wire fences. The road they traveled was straight and flat, no sign of any other vehicles for miles. The feeble glow of the Cherokee's headlights preceded them and beyond that, only darkness was visible. For a moment Daniel had the impression that nothing existed in front of the Cherokee, except what was revealed – or perhaps brought into existence – by the vehicle's headlights. If that was true, what would happen if he switched the headlights off? Would the road beneath them disappear, sending the Cherokee, not to mention its occupants, plunging downward in an endless descent into nothingness?

"Faster!"

Billy urged. "They're catching up!"

His passenger's frantic voice snapped Daniel back to reality – or at least what passed for it this night. He checked the rearview and saw the shadow-car closing fast, its shiny black surface tinted a sinister red by the Cherokee's brake lights. Daniel still couldn't see into

the vehicle, but he didn't need to. He knew the four shadowmen were in there; he could *feel* them . . . feel their eagerness, their hunger, almost as if they were broadcasting their all-consuming need on some psychic frequency.

The Cherokee was already doing close to eighty, but Daniel pressed the accelerator down further. The engine resisted at first,

men themselves, the four merged together as one, disguised, their strength combined so that they could travel swiftly and run their prey to ground.

Beads of cold sweat dotted Daniel's forehead, and he felt a queasy tightness in his jaw muscles, as if he were on the verge of throwing up. "I've had enough of this shit, Billy! I need to know what the fuck's going on, and I need to know *now*!"

Billy didn't respond immediately, and Daniel thought he was going to avoid answering again. But he began speaking in a voice so soft that his words were barely audible over the roar of the Cherokee's engine.


"They don't have a name, at least, not one I know. I've never heard them speak. Maybe they can't." He shrugged. "You know those fish that just lay there on the bottom of the tank, sucking up all the other fishes' shit?"

"Bottom feeders," Daniel supplied. He glanced at the rearview again. The shadowcar was no closer, but it was no farther away, either.

"Yeah. That's what I figure they are. Not fish, of course." He let out a snuffle of a laugh. "But they do the same sort of thing. I guess you could say they eat the garbage of existence. I'm not talking about the kind of crap people throw out of car windows as they drive – empty coffee cups,

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but then its rumble deepened and the vehicle slowly began to pick up more speed. In the rearview, the shadowcar receded, but only by a few yards. It still managed to keep up just fine. A terrible thought occurred to him then: maybe the shadowcar wasn't a vehicle after all. Maybe it was the shadow-

crumpled fast-food bags, that sort of shit. Not physical trash. They clean up the other stuff we leave behind. Painful memories we try to suppress and forget. Uncomfortable emotions that we struggle to cast out as if exorcising demons. We can't see these things, but they're real. You can feel them. Ever been in an empty room and felt that the atmosphere was emotionally charged? Maybe you sense lingering hostility or a profound sadness. That's what they feed on. Good thing, too, because if all that shit were allowed to build up . . ." He shuddered. "Well, it would be one fuck of a mess, I bet."

Billy's explanation sounded insane to Daniel, but then it was no more insane than the reality of the four shadowmen. Daniel doubted that even the most logical and plausible of explanations – and Billy's didn't count as either – could've satisfied him. How could something like the shadowmen ever truly be explained?

Daniel checked the rearview again, and this time he had to look twice before he could bring himself to believe what he saw: the shadowcar had fallen back at least a dozen yards, maybe more. Wild exultation filled him, and he nearly let out a whoop of delight.

Billy must've sensed his reaction, for he turned around and looked out the back window. "Hot damn, Daniel! You're doing it!" He gave Daniel a congratulatory punch on the shoulder. "Keep it up. If we can put enough distance between us and them, we can cut the lights and pull off onto a side road or maybe into a farmer's driveway. They're simple-minded and act mostly on instinct. Once they set out in a direction, they won't deviate from it without a good reason. If they don't

see us turn, it won't even occur to them that we did so. They'll keep on going straight for miles before realizing they lost us. And by then, we'll have pulled back onto the road and hauled ass in the other direction."

Billy's plan seemed like nothing more than wishful thinking, like a child who believes that once he's covered his eyes no one else can see him. But then Daniel remembered something he'd witnessed when he'd been a child himself. He'd spent a week visiting his grandfather at his farm, and he'd watched one day as his grandfather's German shepherd chased a rabbit. Just as the dog was about to move in for the kill, the rabbit veered off at a ninety-degree angle and bounded away in a series of long leaps. The shepherd continued running straight while the rabbit fled. Eventually the dog stopped running and trotted back and forth across the field, confused, sniffing the ground in an attempt to pick up the rabbit's trail. But the rabbit had broken the trail by leaping, and though the shepherd continued searching for the trail for the better part of a half hour, the dog never found it again.

Maybe Billy was right about the shadowmen, maybe they did operate on instinct, just like Grandpa's dog. And if that was true, they maybe Billy's plan had a chance of working. For the first time since he'd gazed up the shadowmen, Daniel began to feel a slight glimmer of hope that he just might survive this night.

Another check of the rearview mirror showed that the shadowmen had fallen so far behind that their dark vehicle was almost lost to sight.

"Now?" Daniel asked.

Billy glanced over his shoulder. "Almost. Give it another minute or so."

Daniel wondered whether his Cherokee would last that long. He kept his vehicle in good condition, but it was overdue for servicing, and any car, no matter how well made and maintained, could only run flat out for so long before something went wrong. A burnt gasket, a leaking hose, a thrown rod – any one of those would put an end to their flight and allow the shadowmen to catch up. And once they did . . . Daniel wasn't exactly sure what the damned things would do, but he doubted it would be much fun. Not for him and Billy at any rate.

"You said those things have been chasing you for a while now. If they feed on leftover emotional gunk, why are they after you?" Daniel had almost said *after us* but he didn't want to put himself into the same category as Billy. Let Billy remain the shadowmen's chosen victim. For as long as he could, Daniel wanted to continue to pretend he was the guy who'd come to Billy's rescue and not a victim himself. And if he didn't truly believe it, at least he could act like he did. It wasn't much, but it was all he had to hold down the ocean of terror roiling beneath the surface of his mind, and it would have to do.

Billy's sigh was heavy with weariness. "There are some people who become a focus for others' negative emotions. They absorb those feelings, whether they like it or not, store them like living batteries." He thought for a moment. "Maybe more like a steak soaking up a marinade before it's cooked." He looked at Daniel and gave him a sickly grin. "Makes for good eat-

ing, I imagine.”

Daniel’s stomach lurched at the imagery Billy’s words conjured in his mind. “And you’re one of these people, one of these . . . psychic batteries?” But before he finished asking the question, Daniel already knew the answer. Billy Wallace had been a pariah in high school, a punching bag, a dumping ground for any negative emotion someone felt like hurling at him, force-fed like a farm animal bred for slaughter. He was a fatted calf, and to the shadowmen he would be a feast, a banquet of emotions darker than their own ebon substance.

“I didn’t do much after high school,” Billy said. “But then I wasn’t voted most likely to succeed, was I? I worked at a gas station for a few years, but the owner never liked me and eventually I was fired. Same thing happened at all the other jobs I ever managed to land, until finally I couldn’t get work anymore. I guess by that time I’d soaked up so much of other people’s shit that no one could stand being around me for very long. I was homeless for a while after that, lived right here on the streets of Ash Creek. You probably saw me around a dozen times as you drove around town, but you never noticed me. No one did. Not until they showed up. I figure they were drawn by my psychic scent, or whatever you’d call it. That was six months ago and –”

Billy broke off and pointed out the windshield.

“There! See that dirt road up their off to the left? That’s perfect!” He turned around in his seat and looked out the back window. “I don’t see any sign of them. Now’s our chance!”

Daniel checked the

rearview one more time and saw only darkness. He knew that didn’t mean the shadowmen weren’t still back there, though. They weren’t on their bumper anymore, but with the way their dark vehicle blended with the night, there was no telling how far behind they’d fallen. Maybe not far enough. Still, this might be the only chance he and Billy got.

“Hold on,” Daniel said. He took his foot off the gas, let the Cherokee decelerate for a few seconds, and then hit the brake. He had to resist the urge to jam the pedal to the floor. At the speed they were going, they’d end up in the ditch, maybe even flip over. As it was, the Cherokee’s back end shimmied and Daniel had to fight to maintain control of the vehicle. The dirt road – which Daniel knew would in truth be a mud road after the rain they’d had earlier – came up faster than he expected. He yanked the steering wheel to the left, and the Cherokee hydroplaned as Daniel aimed for the entrance. The vehicle slid onto the road sideways, and as Daniel had feared, it was nothing but mud. When the Cherokee hit the road it kept right on sliding, smashing through a wire fence and into an empty field whose crop – wheat or perhaps soybeans – had been harvested some time ago. But even as they slid into the field, Daniel had the presence of mind to flip off the Cherokee’s headlights and take his foot off the brake, and they came to a stop in darkness.

Daniel turned off the engine, just in case the sound might attract the shadowmen’s attention. Besides, he doubted they’d be able to drive out of this muck anytime soon. They’d probably have to be towed out. Of course, if their ruse

didn’t work and the shadowmen found them, getting his Cherokee out of the field would be the least of his worries.

Daniel and Billy sat, listening to the ticking of the Cherokee’s overheated engine. A faint odor of burning plastic drifted in through the vents, but Daniel barely registered it. He was too busy looking out the windows, searching the night for sign of the shadowmen. He saw nothing, but as he started to feel optimism stirring, he reminded himself that they wouldn’t see anything – not until the shadowmen were almost on top of them, and by then it would be too late.

While Daniel feared the shadowmen, for their sheer otherworldliness if nothing else, sitting there in the dark, watching and waiting, he realized he didn’t fear dying. He’d been seeing a therapist ever since Angie had told him she wanted a divorce, and he’d just had his latest appointment two days ago. After telling the psychologist how he felt like a failure as a husband and a father – absolutely without worth to anyone, least of all himself – she’d tried to turn the conversation in a more “productive” direction by having him focus on the future.

What are you looking forward to? she’d asked.

After a moment’s thought, he’d answered. *Nothing.*

But that hadn’t been his first answer. The one that had popped into his head the moment she’d asked the question, the one he’d left unvoiced, consisted of two simple words. *My death.*

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if the shadowmen found him. Maybe it had been a mistake to run in the first place. A missed opportunity.

Billy spoke then, interrupting Daniel's grim thoughts.

"Do you remember what you did when those boys started to beat me up in the locker room?"

For a moment Daniel had no idea what Billy was talking about, but then it came back to him. He answered without taking his gaze from the windows and the darkness that lay beyond the glass. "I tried to help you."

"You took two steps toward me. Exactly two. Yes, I counted, and yes, I've never forgotten. I also have never forgotten what you said. 'Hey, guys, enough's enough. Leave him alone.' Do you recall what happened after that?" Billy's tone had taken on an insistent, almost demanding edge, which Daniel chose to ignore.

"One of the boys – Chris Milligan, I think – told me that if I didn't stay out of it I'd get my ass kicked too." Even now, sitting in the dark waiting for creatures out of nightmare to come for him, Daniel felt shame at the memory. Shame because he hadn't stood up to Chris and the others. Because he'd backed away and gotten dressed to the sound of the crowd laughing as Chris and his cohorts returned to their fun. They were still at it when he left the locker room and headed off for class, Billy's sobs lingering in his ears.

"None of them – Chris Milligan, Bob Lewis, or Douglas Sanderson – was ever punished." Billy's voice was thick with venom now, so much so that the sound of it made Daniel turn away from the window and look the man in the face. A face that became increasingly twisted with hate as he went on. "That fat-ass Briggs never checked to see what went on in the locker room, but I always figured

he knew. How could he not? You know gym teachers. They figure shit like that will toughen you up, and if it doesn't, you're a pussy and you deserve whatever you get. I survived, but I lost a couple teeth, and I still walk with a limp on my right side."

Daniel remembered when he first saw Billy tonight, illuminated by the Cherokee's headlights, his right leg looking as if it might buckle any second.

Billy paused then and his mouth eased into a sly smile, though hatred continued to burn in his eyes. "Everything I've told you about the shadow creatures is true. But I never said they were *chasing* me. I said I've been *dealing* with them for a while. I chose my words very carefully, Daniel. They were drawn to me because they wanted to feed on me, but they didn't want to kill me. They wanted to keep me alive so that I could continue to produce negative emotions for them, like a cow giving milk."

"Nothing personal, but that's an image I could've done without."

"Go ahead and laugh if you want, but my friends are plenty satisfied with what I give them. So much so that from time to time they do little favors for me."

Daniel kept his gaze fastened on Billy, but out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something dark move outside the Cherokee. No, *some*things. Plural.

"I told you they're not very intelligent, at least not in a way you and I recognize, but I've learned to communicate with them over the last few months. Enough to get my ideas across, anyway. We visited Briggs first. He was responsible for making sure students behaved in gym. A responsibility he obvi-

ously didn't give a fuck about. The sonofabitch was retired and stuck in a nursing home, but he was still fat as ever. After that, we visited the others – first Chris Milligan, then Bob, then Douglas." His smile became a grin. "Now it's your turn. I saved you for last because what you did was worse than any of the others. As much as I hated them, I understood that they were just acting according to their natures. Not that I forgave them for it – or spared them. But you understood that what they did was wrong, and you even tried to stop it. Except you pushed out in the end. For a moment, I believed there was someone on this sorry shit-pile of a planet who gave a damn about me. But then you turned your back and walked away. That's the worst thing anyone's ever done to me. Worse than all the punches, kicks, and namecalling I endured as a kid . . . worse than all the bosses who yelled at me and told me I was nothing when I became an adult, all the women who wouldn't even waste the saliva to spit on me. And you know what was worst of all?"

There was definitely movement outside the Cherokee now, and it was close.

"Because I gave you hope," Daniel said. "And then I took it away."

"Exactly." Billy glanced out the window, and the venom in his voice gave way to eager anticipation. "It's been a long time, Daniel, but your bill has finally come due." Billy was so excited that he was quivering, nearly bouncing on the passenger seat.

"How many times did you practice that little speech? Nevermind. I've got a serious question: why go to all the trouble of pretending to run away from the

shadowmen? They could've just taken me back in the parking lot. No, wait. I get it. You wanted me to see what it was like to have hope taken away."

"Smart man." Billy's grin stretched wider then, assuming a maniacal aspect that Daniel found quite appropriate given the circumstances. "Besides," he added, "it was more fun this way."

"I'm sure. So . . . you hook up with supernatural creatures that are willing to do favors for you as long as you keep supplying them with the good dark stuff, and the best you can come up with is to use them to kill some people who pissed you off in high school?"

The hatred in Billy's eyes dimmed as doubt moved across his face, but a second later a sneer contorted his features, and the fire in his gaze burned strong as ever. "You're just like all the others who made my life miserable over the years, for no other reason than to punish me for the crime of existing."

Movement caught Daniel's attention, and he turned toward the driver's side window to see an ebon hand press against the glass. It was followed by a second hand, and then a dark eyeless face appeared between them and leaned forward. A round orifice gaped open in the middle of the face and affixed itself to the window, the ring of black muscle pulsing rhythmically as if the creature were trying to suck Daniel's psychic energy through the glass. With a sick twist of nausea, Daniel remembered how Billy had described the shadowmen as bottom feeders, and he had to admit the comparison was grotesquely apt.

The remaining shadowmen joined their companion – two on

the driver's side window, two on the passenger's – until all four obscene mouths were sealed against glass sucking, sucking . . .

Daniel should've been terrified, and on some level he was. But he also felt a strange sense of peace settle over him.

"I'm not going to pretend I know what it was like for you to grow up as the world's emotional tampon," Daniel said, "But the past doesn't excuse the present. There are lots of things we can't control in life – too damned many – but there's one thing we can control, and that's the choices we make. You've made your choice, Billy. Now it's time for me to make mine."

Daniel undid his seatbelt, then thumbed a switch on the driver's side door, causing the locks to disengage with muffled *chunks*.

Billy frowned in confusion. "You're going to give yourself to them?" He sounded disappointed, as if he felt cheated that Daniel wasn't going to struggle and beg for his life.

"No. I'm going to leave – or at least try to. I have to go work tomorrow, and I've got to mail a check to my ex-wife. You can live in yesterday if you want, but I've been there, and I wouldn't recommend it."

Daniel started to push the driver's door open, and the two shadowmen standing at the window drew back – almost eagerly, he thought – to give him room. He shoved the door the rest of the way open, and stepped out into the cold night. His plan was simple: to start running as fast as he could manage across the muddy field and get as far as he could before whatever happened, happened. It might not have been much of a plan, but that

was okay. It was his, and for the first time in months, he felt alive again.

He inhaled deeply and prepared to run as four patches of darkness closed in. NA

Noctem Aeternus Magazine

It Slices

It Dices

**It makes
julienne fries!**

**That's right.
julienne fries!**

**You got a
problem with
that?**

**I didn't
think so**



DRAGGED DOWN

by Ramsey Campbell

As usual, Mz Chester meant far too well. Once all of Year Eight AM were at their desks and starting to be relatively quiet she said “Who’s going to tell us a legend about the tunnel?”

“Miss me miss.” Having wiped his floppy mouth, Craig offered “There’s a man in the middle with needles sticking out of him and he waits for girls to walk through.”

“You wish.” Jade finished touching up her lips and stowed the mirror and lipstick in her leather bag before adding “He’s got a doctor’s knife and he cuts the lychees off the boys.”

“He chucks them in the canal,” her friend Davina agreed, “and they come out Angie Leek’s end.”

Bas was close to protesting that wasn’t Angelique’s name, since she’d confined herself to a tired smile, when Mz Chester intervened. “I hope none of you watches films like that,” she said. “I told you last week, those aren’t legends. They have to be stories you can’t trace back to their source.”

Over the weekend boys

had shouted challenges and worse at one another through the tunnel before meeting halfway, where several had ended up in the canal. As he saw she wanted to foster the idea that the tunnel might represent more than a division between the halves of the town, Bas had an inspiration. “You don’t need to shout,” he said.

Mz Chester pushed her glasses higher on her almost equally square face. “I don’t believe I was, Basil.”

“Not you, miss. I mean down there. You just have to whisper at the end and anyone that’s at the other side can hear you.”

“That’s not a legend,” Craig spluttered. “Snot even a story.”

“You can make it one,” Jade told Davina. “You have to go at midnight...”

“And you’ll hear someone saying your name and you have to go to them...”

Angelique raised her hand, but only to prop her chin on her fist. Like her friends, she seemed increasingly bullied into silence by their classmates from the other side of town. Bas felt he was demonstrating that it didn’t only produce bullies as he added “Because they’ll be the person you’ll spend the rest of your life with.”

That didn’t apply to his parents, though couples stayed together in many of the books he liked. Perhaps the unreality was why his

barely teenage peers greeted the idea with derision, even some from Angelique’s side of the tunnel. This didn’t matter once she gave him a quick smile like a secret she was sharing just with him. “That’s much more like it,” Mz Chester said. “That’s really quite authentic.”

“What’s or then trick?”

“Authentic, Jade. You can say it if you try.” Having waited in vain, the teacher said “I’m saying Basil’s legend sounds like a real one.”

“He robbed it, you mean,” said Davina.

“I don’t steal,” Bas protested. “I made it up.”

“If it isn’t a tradition it deserves to be,” Mz Chester confused him by declaring. “Now I want you all to write a legend about the tunnel, and we won’t have any based on nasty films. Think about the fairy tales you liked when you were little. Some people like them even at my age.”

Bas shielded his exercise book with his arms while he developed the idea that if you went to the tunnel at midnight and whispered the name of the person you wanted to marry they would have to come to the other end. It did resemble some of the stories his mother used to read to him. He wondered what Angelique might be imagining beneath the concealment of her long blonde hair, but he

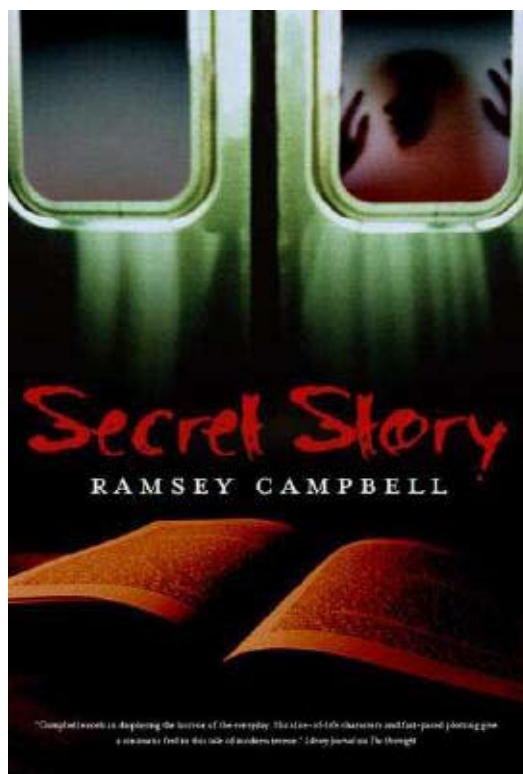
couldn't read her small neat handwriting across the aisle. Mz Chester waited for them to finish before having Craig collect everybody's books. "Lots of trolls," she commented. "Very good, Angelique and Basil."

Craig rewarded him with a vicious punch on his upper arm. By the time Bas recovered, the girls had been sent ahead out of the classroom as usual. He almost caught up with Angelique in the schoolyard until her brother Sebastian, two years older and bulkier, escorted her and her friends out of the gates. As they and their associates staked their claim to the suburb, Bas made for his side of the tunnel.

A teacher was stationed at the top of the steps to the canal, shaking his head at any pupils of Waterside College who ventured near. Bas joined the rowdy exodus across the bridge above six lanes of speeding traffic. Someone had cut a new hole in the wire mesh that was supposed to prevent people from dropping debris on the road. Through it Bas saw how his territory of tower blocks surrounded by low houses – cartons for humans, he always thought – was divided from the wider thoroughfares of ample twofold dwellings beyond the school. In a minute the littered street lined with untaxed cars brought him home. He transferred a pair of empty lager cans from the stunted wall of the token front yard to the bin on the way to admitting himself to the house.

His mother had found time between cleaning offices and hospital wards to cook him a casserole. He microwaved and ate it all, even the vegetables. Once he'd washed up he stayed in the boxy kitchen

with his homework – easy English, not much harder History, dully detailed Science – and then went into the other downstairs room to watch some of the sort of film Mz Chester disapproved of. Later still he took an Alan Garner novel from one of the shelves in his room to bed. With his window open as far as the slat at the top would strain, the June heat and the muted lapping of the canal put him to sleep.



He was rowing a boat through the tunnel, if his unseen companion wasn't wielding the oars, when his mother flustered him awake. "Breakfast on the table," she urged as soon as he left the cubicle of a bathroom. She scrutinised the backs of his ears and tidied his shirt collar and patted down a tuft of his hair while he was too busy to escape, and gave him a harassed hug and kiss the instant he'd finished. "Pardon me if I run," she said, though she looked more tired than ever. "We'll do something at the weekend."

He knew she had to work hard, which was why he tried. Even with two jobs she couldn't afford to rent a house any better than this. He heard the engine of her Mini struggling to start as he washed the breakfast things. On his way across the bridge he saw bits of wood like the remains of a wreck floating out of the tunnel past the school. Parents who'd campaigned against moving Waterside College to the new site stood like vigilantes under the sign that bore the mottoes MORE THAN A SCHOOL – A COMMUNITY and EXCLUSIVELY INCLUSIVE and OUR MISSION PROMISE: LIVE AND LEARN. Some parents frowned at the trespassers, including Bas, and he wondered how they would react if they learned he didn't feel part of either group of pupils. He was looking for Angelique when the assembly bell summoned everyone into the school.

He was almost fast enough into the hall to sit by her. Behind her was next best, even if it placed him between Craig and Jade. He admired the sheen of her hair and a glimpse of her nape framed by two blonde locks while Jade popped fleshy bubbles of gum and Craig misspelled a female syllable on the back of the seat occupied by Angelique's friend Glenda. The pupils stood, many miming weariness, as Mr Lemon strode onstage. Once they'd collapsed into their seats again the headmaster clasped his hands over his capacious stomach and made a chin vanish by raising his head to survey the audience. Bas thought he looked like a comedian determined to be serious, but perhaps it was the other way round, because Mr Lemon said "Who's got some

change?"

By now the school was used to his approach, and groans were the only response. Some of the teachers seated behind him seemed to feel expected to be eager, and Mr Mayhew dug in a hip pocket. "Change for the better," Mr Lemon said, and a few teachers dutifully laughed. "What makes change?" he enquired, and answered his own question when nobody fell for it. "Imagination, that's the secret. It sounds as if it's made up of an image and a nation, doesn't it? It's where the image of our nation comes from. A nation's a community, and what's our school?"

"Community," Bas felt compelled to mouth as others muttered it.

"Shout up or you'll have people imagining you aren't proud of it. We're all part of its image, and we need to make that positive. If you've a positive image of yourself you can change for the better. Shall I tell you what I heard?"

Bas had heard a yawn infecting several pupils, but Mr Mayhew murmured "Please, head."

"It shows you can give anything a better image, even that tunnel where I hope we'll be seeing

no more trouble. Mz Chester asked Year Eight AM to come up with a positive story about it, and if this isn't true it ought to be. They say if you stand at the end of the tunnel at midnight and call the name of the person you want to marry you'll

ed of catcalls and simulated vomiting. "Don't scoff unless you can do better," Mr Lemon said. "That's to say, don't even if you can." He led the school in the day's hymn of inclusion, and when he'd finished clapping along to it he cried

"What's our job today?"

"Know something we didn't know yesterday," Bas wished he didn't feel bound to mouth. He shielded his arm from Craig's responsive punch as they spilled into the aisle, and heard Glenda say to Angelique "That was your midnight story, wasn't it?"

"No, it was me," Bas said so loud that teachers frowned at him.

"Never mind trying to be like us. You tell him, Ange."

Angelique gave him a bright-eyed look. "It was mine, actually."

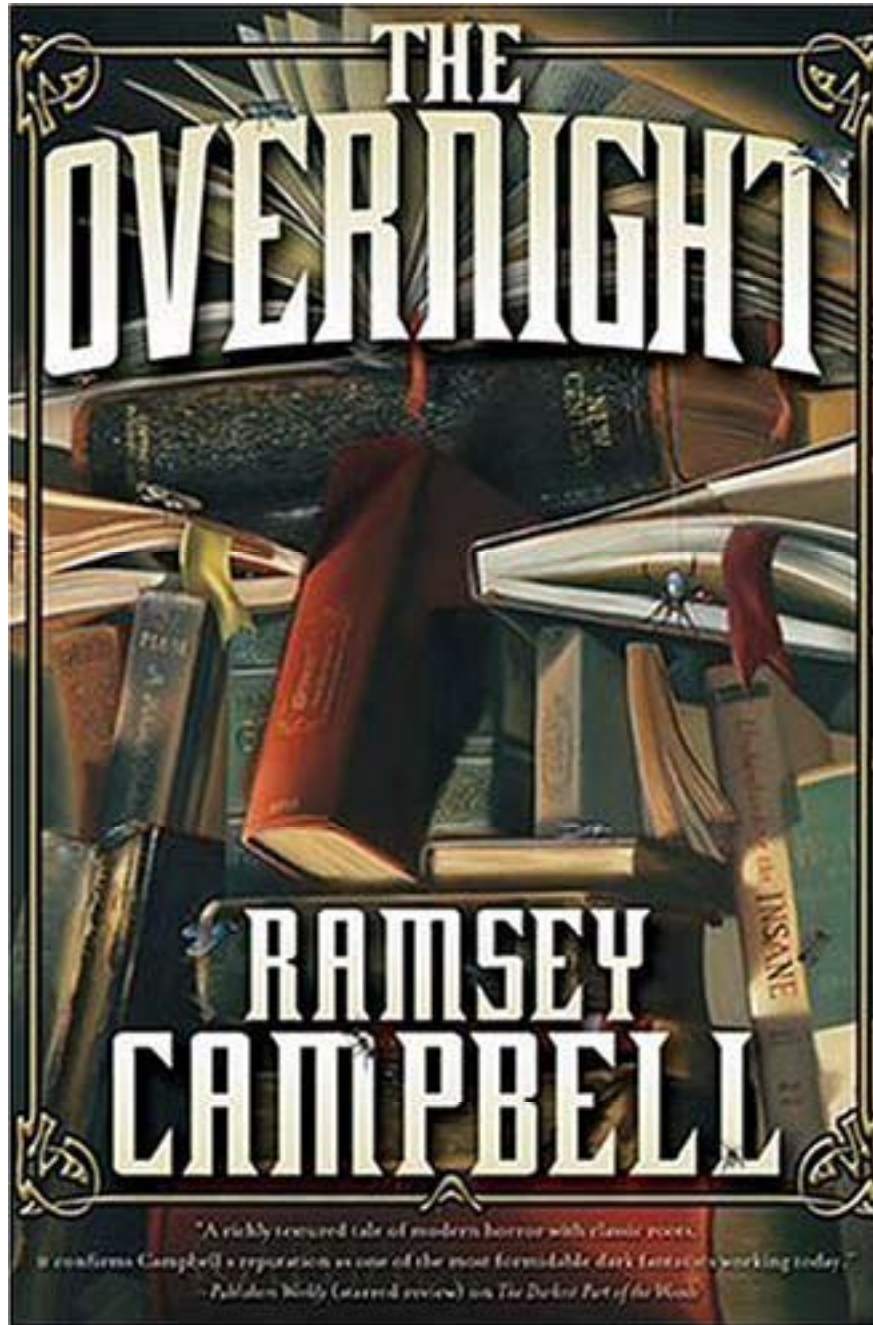
Though he didn't want to argue with her, she seemed to have robbed him of any other words.

Before he could

reply Craig said "You calling him a liar, Angie Leek?"

"She doesn't want to call him anything, and that's not her name."

"Should be Leaky Ange,"



see them at the other end."

Some of Year Eight NZ had begun to grow resentful until they heard the legend, and Bas would have resented not being named if the general reaction hadn't consist-

Davina said, and Jade emitted a supportive pop.

Angelique blushed for some reason that was beyond Bas, though he felt it related to his presence. She said no more on the way to the classroom, where Glenda said “Mz Chester, it was Ange’s legend Mr Lemon told us, wasn’t it?”

“It was hers and Basil’s.”

Not only Glenda looked outraged for Angelique. “He copied hers, you mean,” said Glenda.

Angelique shook her head so vigorously that it appeared to double its bloneness. “I didn’t see him copying.”

“Nor did I,” Mz Chester said. “You both got the idea by yourselves, didn’t you? Or you thought you did. Maybe you were tapping into myth. That’s how folk stories get started. Nobody knows who was the first to tell them.”

Once the teacher’s attention moved elsewhere, Glenda scowled at Bas. “Just because she didn’t see you doesn’t mean you didn’t cheat,” she hissed.

He was sure he glimpsed sympathy in Angelique’s glance. He felt cramped by failing to speak, but too many people would have overheard. He hardly said a word all morning, even when teachers gazed at him as if he was letting them down. When he ended up behind Angelique in the lunch queue he was afraid that he’d left it too late. Then she reached for a tray, and as he fumbled to hand her the topmost, the roar of conversations and clangour of utensils let him blurt “We ought to try it.”

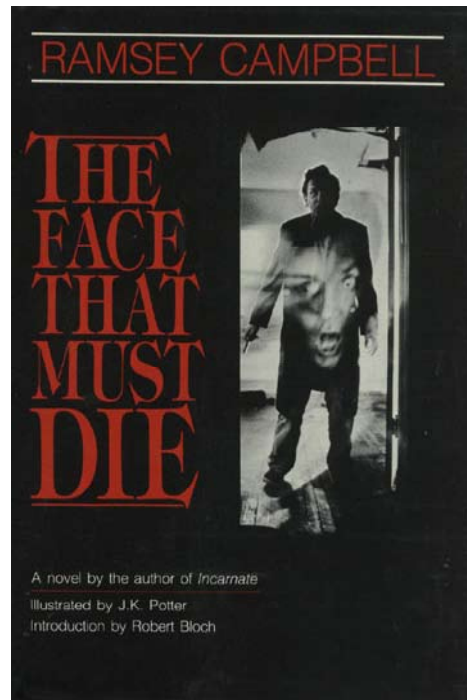
Her slim fingers didn’t quite touch his. “Ta,” she said but added “What?”

“See what happens if you call down the tunnel.”

“We’re here, Ange,” Glenda interrupted as she headed for a table.

Angelique turned away, but not before flashing him a toothbrushed smile and murmuring “I wonder.”

So did he, but that was as much as he dared. He wasn’t sure if Glenda had heard, though she and her cronies found a subject to whisper and giggle about once



Angelique joined them. Suppose the others came with her to the tunnel? Suppose only they came? He wouldn’t be able to bear their derision, especially if it spread through the school. Before he’d finished that night’s casserole he had pretty well decided not to go – but suppose Angelique turned up and assumed he’d set out to humiliate her? The possibility distracted him from his homework and the television, even when the programmes abandoned good behaviour after nine o’clock. Even so, if his mother’s job at the hospital on the far side of the tunnel hadn’t kept her

out until the early hours he might not have left the house.

A parched breeze jangled the wire mesh on the bridge and fluttered the litter that did for leaves on the bushes a few front gardens boasted. The traffic had abated; just the occasional wave of sound merged with the lapping of the canal. As he picked his way down the weedy steps at the end of the road, Bas heard glass smash in the other half of town. He was hoping it wouldn’t divert Angelique as he stepped on the towpath.

One of the spotlights protecting the school shone directly into the canal. It lent the water beyond the tunnel the aggressive brightness of the rim of an eclipse, which charred the inside of the passage blacker than the sky. Beside the school foreshortened silhouettes of railings lay in the canal, crumbling with rust or rather losing definition to the glare. As they stirred like fronds of weed he wasn’t sure if he’d glimpsed a figure disappearing around the curve of the towpath. “Are you there?” he called under his breath.

His voice must have carried out of the tunnel, because it sent some creature off the path into the water. The small echoing plop sounded as if it were at his feet. The drowned railings wriggled sluggishly while reflections of the tried to climb the steep banks before slithering back. Otherwise there was no response, and so Bas whispered “Angelique.”

The tunnel emitted a thunderous rumble as a car passed above him. Even when he spoke her name as if she were beside him it earned no answer. Was there a figure among the restless metal bars? He could have imagined that it was escaping from the unstable

submerged cage. Had it returned, or was there another? The antics of the railings made him uncertain whether he was seeing anyone at all. He'd repeated Angelique's name several times before he began to feel ridiculous, all the more so if she was silently eavesdropping. He stalked home to dream that she was locked in an underwater cage and pleading with him to let her out before she drowned. At least she was gratifyingly grateful when he did.

He never found out how much, because his mother wakened him for breakfast. The dream left him wondering if he had indeed seen Angelique through the tunnel – if she could have been too shy to make herself known. He was afraid that his mother might ask why he was preoccupied, but she must have concerns of her own. "Busy day again," she said as a mingled apology and farewell and perhaps as an exhortation to him.

She'd wakened late, which meant he had. Once she hurried out he gobbled the rest of his breakfast before giving the plate as quick a wash as he'd had in the bathroom. He ran across the bridge, much to the disdain of schoolmates who were taking all the time they could,

and reached the school only just ahead of the bell. He had to sit several rows behind Angelique in the hall, wishing that classmates were required to sit together instead of being encouraged to make new acquaintances. How could she

beyond the stage. Presumably Mr Lemon was unaware of this, since he said "And don't we think a community should be able to police itself?" While nobody expressed disagreement, this didn't seem to be enough for him. "It should sad-

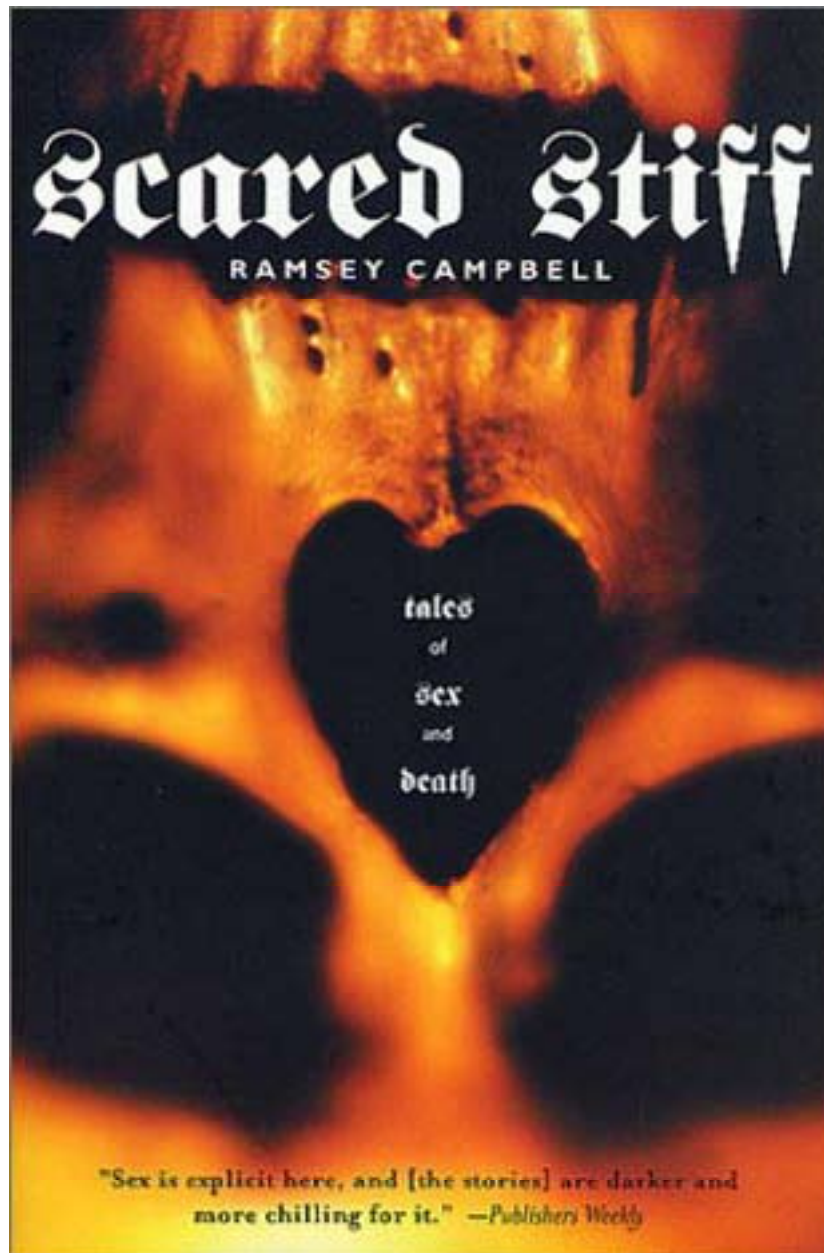
den every one of us that we've had to call the police in," he said and dabbed at one eye. "Let's hope they don't trace the crime back to any member of our community. If any of us know anything, they can prove they're members by coming to me."

He'd been staring wistfully at the audience for some moments when Mr Mayhew cleared his throat. "Should we tell them what's happened?"

"I was about to, thank you, Leonard." Having repeated his pause, Mr Lemon said "The school was broken into last night. Six new computers were taken, not even out of their boxes."

Now Bas knew where the glass had been smashed, and perhaps why he'd glimpsed figures dodging past the railings. He felt as if his

hot face could draw the missile of Mr Lemon's gaze. If he ought to have realised he was hearing burglars at the school, wasn't Angelique just as responsible? She would have been closer to the robbery if she had come to the tunnel. Once everyone had finished swaying and



not sense his gaze on her neck? She hadn't acknowledged it when Mr Lemon strode onstage more purposefully than ever. "Hands up anyone who doesn't think we're a community," he said.

Bas suspected quite a few were being withheld, and not just

clapping to the day's communal chant he hurried to catch her up as they left the hall. "Angelique, did you –"

She was turning when Glenda interrupted. "What are you after now?"

"I'm trying to ask about last night."

"She's told me she knows nothing about it. It's people like you they need to look at."

"What do you mean, people like me?"

"People from your side of town. People who their parents don't know where they are at night, if they've got any parents."

Before Bas could produce a retort, perhaps aimed at her grammar, Davina joined in. "Don't you call us robbers, specially not him."

"He's better than any of you lot," said Jade, "and that means Angie Leek."

"I'm not," Bas protested. "I don't need you saying things like that. I'm just me."

"Well, excuse us," Jade said. "We didn't know we weren't good enough to talk about you."

"We'd better leave him with his friends he wants to be like," said Davina.

Bas sidled past her, but too late. Angelique was halfway down the corridor. His frustration was so close to rage that he didn't trust himself to speak, either in class or at break, when she was surrounded by friends. He was nowhere near her in the lunch queue, and the stares of her friends kept him away from her table. He retreated to one full of fourth years whom he didn't know and who didn't want to know him. At least this let him concentrate on watching Angelique, and when she made for the counter to return her tray he seized his. As he

attempted to head her off before she could rejoin her group, her brother stepped in his way. "Where do you think you're going?"

Bas brandished the tray. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like a little boy who doesn't know where he belongs."

Bas did his best to stand taller, though it felt as if his hot face were hauling him up. "I'm not a little boy," he said louder than he meant to, "and –"

"That's not all you are you think you're not." As his sister hesitated nearby Sebastian regarded her just long enough to say "I'm dealing with this."

She blinked at them before retreating to her table. Bas turned towards it, but Sebastian sidestepped to block him, which made Bas blurt "I only want –"

"We know what you want, and you won't be getting it." Sebastian worked his hefty shoulders as if limbering up for a fight and leaned his snub-nosed bludgeon of a face at Bas. "Maybe we have to help you people get an education now they've moved the school," he said near the top of his voice, "but you can forget about dragging us down. And in case that isn't simple enough for you, that means stay away from my little sister."

Bas heard jeers and laughter, no doubt aimed at him. Shouldn't the teacher overseeing lunch have intervened on behalf of the school? Bas avoided looking at him too and blundered almost blindly out of the uproarious hall. He took refuge in the boys' toilets, in the solitary cubicle with an intact bolt, where he gazed at the mass of misspelled sentences and even cruder drawings, formulae to conjure sex up, that enclosed him. At

the end of lunchtime a lone memory let him venture out, though he wasn't sure of it. He only thought Angelique had wanted to speak up for him.

It wasn't enough. He was unable to catch her eye, let alone the expression he'd seemed to glimpse. Surely she wasn't spurning him as Glenda and her giggling gaggle made a show of doing, or as Craig and Jade and Davina brusquely did. When lessons ended Bas tried to overtake her in the corridor until he saw that her brother had taken charge. He hung back in the school until they were well beyond the gate.

What had she intended her look to convey? He attempted to suppress the question by lingering over the latest casserole and then over his homework. They failed to distract him, and so did returning discs to Dave's Video Dive next to the Angler's Arms and the Bet Your Life betting shop – even the films he borrowed to watch. The words of a Philip Pullman novel fell short of his brain, and he was about to undress for bed when he grew aware of the whisper of the canal. Although it was beyond the back yard and the alley and a second fence, it could almost have been under his window. The restlessness of water – the sibilance of ripples followed by their lapping against the edge of the canal – sounded like a repetition of his name.

Was it just the water? As he strained his ears, the impression of a summons gathered in his brain. He stood on the bed to shove as much of his head as would fit through the transom. While the sound was no clearer, he was suddenly sure who was calling him. He jumped off the bed and ran out of the house.

His feet seemed hardly to touch the pavement. He felt weightless as a dream. The street appeared to have been refined by the late hour, stripped down to light and shadow. He heard a burglar alarm and the hunting cries of police cars, but they were far away, nothing to do with him. They withdrew into insignificance as he descended the steps to the canal.

He felt as if the dark of the tunnel were focusing the mysteriousness of the night for him. The water was so still that the passage might have been holding its breath on his behalf. When the topsy-turvy railings stirred, he had the notion that they were beckoning him into the dazzle at the far end. He saw no other movement, and wondered if she'd given up on him. "Here," he whispered and, when this produced no Angelique, tried saying conversationally "Here."

In a moment a whisper enlivened the dark. "Basil."

"That's you, isn't it, Angelique?" Since the question felt like doubting her, he wished he hadn't uttered it so loud. "I'm coming," he murmured and advanced into the tunnel.

He hadn't ventured far when the spotlight began to allevi-

ate the gloom, sketching trickles of moisture under the brick arch. All the same, he was taken un-awares by the wallowing bulk that caught up with him in the middle of the passage. He had to let it float onwards before he distinguished that it was a large cardboard box. It was some way ahead by the time

the headmaster. He hurried along the slippery towpath, and the carton drifted among the unstable railings as he reached the mouth of the tunnel. He was making to pace the box until it sailed within reach when the person who had been concealed by the arch stepped in front of him. "Here comes two kinds of refuse,"

Sebastian announced, though he was alone. "What do you mean by calling my sister like a dog?"

"I was saying I was here," Bas felt vulnerable enough to explain.

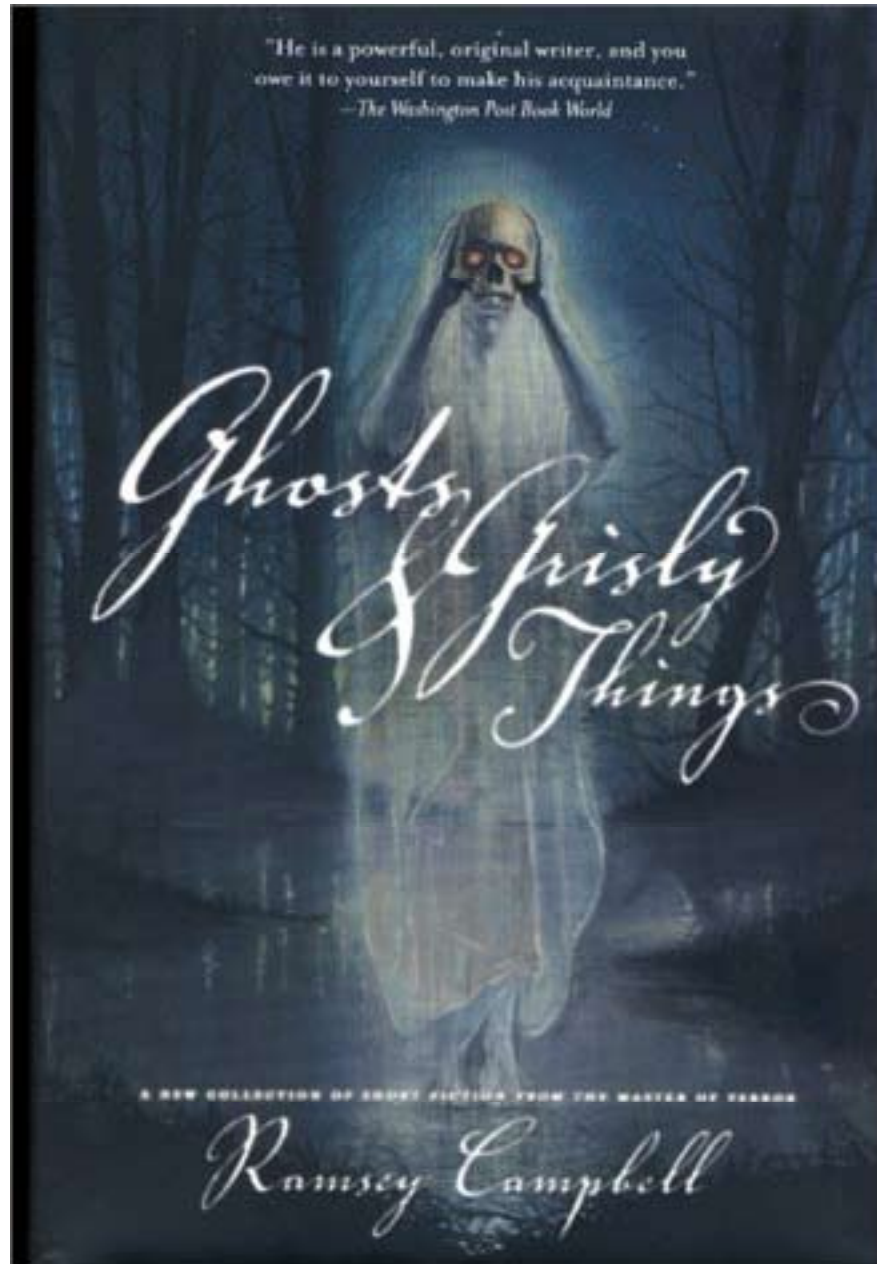
"Do you imagine anyone cares about that? Don't you dare say my sister."

Mightn't Sebastian be interfering because she did? Before Bas could recover from learning that the older boy had been the whisperer, Sebastian peered at the carton. "That's what you were chasing, was it? Trying to dispose of the evidence?"

"I was going to show Mr Lemon."

he realised that it bore a picture of a computer. He ought to grab it, not to hide evidence that the thieves lived on his side of town but so that he and Angelique could take it to

doing that," Sebastian said and blocked his way when Bas tried to sidle around him. "Crawl back in your burrow while you're able and don't come sniffing round here



again.”

There was no way past him. He looked capable of flinging Bas into the canal. He loitered at the entrance until the younger boy was halfway down the tunnel, and Bas willed him to fall in the water as he fished out the carton. There ought to be a legend that wishing would make this or worse happen. Nothing did, and Bas had to retreat into the dilapidated litter-strewn criminal territory that was home. As he reached the house he saw from his watch that it was only just midnight. No wonder his mother still wasn't in, but it hadn't even been time for his and Angelique's legend to work.

He fell asleep dreaming she would tell him that Sebastian had prevented her from coming to the tunnel, and the possibility wakened him before his mother could. “Eager beaver,” she said at breakfast. “I'm glad you like your school.” But when he reached the schoolyard there was no sign of Angelique, not even with her brother.

He couldn't locate her in the hall. Teachers frowned at him for turning around while Mr Lemon assured everyone that speaking up was standing up. Nobody did either in response. Bas wanted to talk to Angelique first, but she wasn't in the classroom. He was nerving himself to question Glenda when Mz Chester said “Basil.”

She had originally connected him and Angelique, and he wondered if she had some news for him. “What, miss?”

“I was right, the story you wrote wasn't so far off the mark. There's a tradition that if you go to the water at midnight you can call spirits out of it.”

“It was our story,” Jade objected to Davina as Craig told them

“Shows he robbed it, robber.”

Bas wasn't sure if Mz Chester was referring specifically to the canal, but another question concerned him more. “It wasn't just mine, it was Angelique's,” he said. “Why isn't she in today?”

“I haven't heard. Does anyone know?”

“We wouldn't tell him,” said Glenda, “even if we did.”

“I hope you'd tell the school,” Mz Chester said as she was summoned by a bleep of the laptop on her desk. “Well, you are in demand today, Basil. You're to go to Mr Lemon's office.”

Bas tried to feel like a celebrity as he tramped along the corridor echoing with teachers' voices. A transverse passage decorated with class work about Buddhism led to the headmaster's door. Not too long after Bas knocked on it Mr Lemon said “Proceed.”

He sat forward at his weighty desk, which hid his stomach, and propped his prayerful hands up before lowering his head an inch that produced an extra chin. “Well, Basil. How are we treating you?”

“All right.” Since this visibly fell short of expectations, Bas added “Fine, I think.”

“Only think? You can't be sure if you're part of our community.” When Bas didn't risk an answer the headmaster said “You could prove you are.”

“How, sir?”

“Just the truth will do,” Mr Lemon said as his face seemed to grow heavier still. “I hear you know more than you're saying about Monday's unfortunate incident.”

“Which one?” Bas managed only to mouth, but he was afraid it might have been legible. “Sebas-

tian Barnes said, didn't he? What was he doing there?”

“Protecting the premises. The question is why you were.”

“Seeing if that legend worked, the one you told us you liked.”

“Storytelling won't help, Basil. The number on the packaging shows it was taken from here.”

“What's that got to do with me?” Bas had to make an effort to say “Sir.”

“We're told you were anxious to dispose of it.”

Bas was enraged to find he couldn't keep his lip from shaking his voice. “I wanted to bring it to show you.”

“You've had your wish, then. It's been shown.” Mr Lemon gazed hard at him before adding “Please try and stay clear in future.”

“Why?” Bas said, too affronted to bother with politeness.

“It can be dangerous down there. I believe a fellow was found drowned in the tunnel while our school was being built.”

Bas remembered his mother using the death to warn him of various dangers, until he'd lost count of how often he'd mumbled agreement. “He was a druggie,” he said.

Mr Lemon frowned as though Bas had contradicted him. “If you've nothing else to say you should be in your class.”

Bas turned towards the door and then back to the desk. “Sir?”

“Anything, by all means.”

“Just Sebastian's sister. Why's she off school?”

“We understand she's unwell.” The question obviously disappointed the headmaster, and so did having to say “I'm glad you're concerned for one of your

new classmates, but better keep it within bounds.”

This time Bas couldn't doubt how he was being told to stay clear. As he trudged back to class he felt like an outcast whose status everyone was aware of, and all the more shameful for having tried to deny it. “Was he saying how you robbed our story?” Jade suggested, and Davina contributed “Was you talking about Angie Leek?” The silence of Glenda and her friends was a comment in itself, and his hot face was more of an answer than he wanted to provide, but he succeeded in staying mute until the first break. In the schoolyard he made for Sebastian before any doubts could impede him. “What's wrong with Angelique?”

“You are.” Sebastian shared mirth with several of his classmates at the spectacle of Bas. “You are, you little upstart,” he said, “and if I hear you've even whispered to her after she comes back, there's a few of us who'll teach you how to shut your mouth.”

Bas felt more than able to do that, helped by his swollen lips. All at once there was only one thing he wanted to say, but it would have to wait for nightfall. Staying utterly quiet for the rest of the day lent his intention more strength, and so did fasting at lunchtime in the bolted cubicle. He was too tense to eat dinner either. He laboured over his homework and then devoted his time to composing a fragment of language that meant far more to him. At last he tore the pages covered with erasures out of the middle of his history exercise book and dropped the crumpled wad in the street on his way to the canal.

The water that the darkness of the tunnel was drawing in

looked thick and sluggish. It was laden with so much garbage – rotting fruit and vegetables, sodden pornographic magazines, opened packs of frozen food, plastic cartons like miniature boats ridden not by witches but by half-chewed hamburgers – that he assumed somebody had tipped at least one bin into the canal. As he followed the parade to the tunnel he felt as if he'd joined it. He leaned into the stony mouth and whispered “Come out. Come out however bad you are.”

Once his voice finished troubling the darkness, the silence grew absolute. His words had become entangled with the echoes of ripples, but now even the lapping had ceased. The light at the far end left the depths of the passage blacker than blindness, and he was straining his eyes when he realised that the cage of the inverted railings had grown as still as the fence itself. He gazed at it for some moments before he grasped what he ought to be seeing. Although the last of the rubbish had vanished into the dark while he was speaking, none of it had emerged from the tunnel.

It must have caught on an obstruction. As his vision began to flicker with strain, he thought he saw where the rubbish had lodged. It appeared to be gathering halfway along the tunnel. The current must be unequal to breaking the jam, though it was pushing it above the surface. Was it really strong enough to raise the dark mass so far? The hulking silhouette had wobbled high enough to outline the roundish lump on top of it against the light when Bas retreated to the steps and fled home.

For the first time in years he gave in to wishing that his mother

would be there. As he lay in bed, yearning to hear a key in the lock, he heard a floundering so hollow that he knew it was in the tunnel. It sounded as if some kind of body was struggling to leave the water. Eventually it ceased, and the canal reverted to lapping. He hadn't looked out of his window since returning to his room, and he wasn't about to do so. At last his nervous vigil was rewarded by a scraping at the front door. It wasn't the scratching of nails or anything like them, it was his mother's key. Once he heard her trudge upstairs he was able to take refuge in sleep.

The surreptitious restlessness of the canal kept waking him, however, until he had to go to the window. A smell of rot drifted through the transom as he saw the marks that trailed through the open gate into the back yard. Even when he realised they came in pairs, they were so differently misshapen that he didn't recognise them as footprints until the intruder shuffled backwards to confront him. It had putrid fruit for eyes, but perhaps there was a skull inside the lump he'd seen silhouetted in the tunnel, because it was grinning, exposing more than teeth. It was thin as a skeleton fleshed out with scraps of garbage, but despite the instability of its substance it was able to caper and stretch its crumbling hands towards him. “What is it?” his mother complained sleepily as he screamed and woke, so that he had to call “Me. Nothing.”

Surely daylight should have taken his fears away, but he was afraid to go downstairs in case his mother saw he was hiding a secret. He loitered in the bathroom until she left the house, and lingered over his breakfast even though he could hardly taste it. He was

nervous of going to school and of understanding why. It might be still worse not to know, and at close to the last moment he dashed out of the house and across the bridge. Was the crowd in the schoolyard more subdued than usual? He couldn't see Angelique, and perhaps more to the point, there was no sign of her brother.

Bas didn't know how this made him feel. Sebastian's friends who had mocked Bas stared at him with open dislike as everyone was rung into the school. In the assembly hall he contrived not to sit near anybody he knew, which isolated him with the sight of the teachers lined up on the stage, all of them as solemn as statues in a tomb. Even Mr Lemon had managed to leave his heartiness behind; indeed, for several seconds after the pupils regained their seats he appeared to have abandoned speech as well. "I'm afraid we have some very sad news," he said at last, and Bas felt as if the headmaster's gaze didn't just include him but was directed at him. "There was apparently an accident last night down in the tunnel. I hope at least it will be a warning to every one of us to stay away in future. It's a sad reflection on our community that we had to lose one of us to bring the danger home to us. Please bow your heads with me in memory of Angelique Barnes from Year Eight AM. Let's believe she is on a voyage to a better place."

Until Mr Lemon named the victim Bas had been able to believe that the muffled sobs clustered in the middle of the hall came from someone other than Glenda and her friends. They sobbed louder while Mr Lemon promised everybody counselling, but she was dry-eyed when she confronted Bas in the

classroom. "I hope you know she went down there because she had a row about you with her brother."

Bas clung to the only inconsistency he could think of. "How do you know that?"

"Because he told us when we went to pick her up for school." Glenda glared at him as if he'd tried to deny the tragedy. "We think she was looking for you," she accused him. "She slipped on some rubbish and got tangled up in more of it and drowned, that's what her dad says must have happened. Shows what can go wrong if we don't stay away from rubbish."

Bas had no retort, because he felt more responsible than she could know. He imagined Angelique's struggles as she was held down in the water, unable to scream, since otherwise he would have heard her. How guilty did he look? Enough so that nobody talked to him, any more than he spoke to them. He wished he could hide in the cubicle all day instead of just at lunchtime. He had never been so glad to find his mother out at work. He left his dinner in the refrigerator and his homework in its bag, and spent the hours in striving to believe there was more to the legend Mz Chester had told him.

Sirens were tearing through the night, but down by the canal it was as quiet as graveyards were in books. Only the water stirred as he paced to the mouth of the tunnel. "Angelique," he pleaded with the darkness. "Angelique." Was he hearing just his own echoes, or was there a fainter whisper underneath them? Was it more than water? "Please be there," he said as loud as he dared, and advanced into the tunnel. The light beyond it blinded him, so that he could move no faster than a sleepwalker on the

treacherous path. The closer he came to the middle of the passage, the more profound the blackness in it seemed to grow. "Is that you?" he murmured almost too breathlessly to hear. Another unseen ripple answered him, and he imagined how cold the lightless depths must be. But the hand that reached up to take his was colder still. NA

Noctem Aeternus Magazine

Twisted
Dark
Cold
Bloody
Bold

Pleasant
Dreams

An Interview with Ramsey Campbell

NA Why horror?

RC Lovecraft declared that the weird tale – by which he meant much of what I mean by horror fiction – could only ever be a portrayal of a certain type of human mood. Certainly one of the pleasures of some of the greatest work in the field is the aesthetic experience of terror (which involves appreciating the structure of the piece and, in prose fiction, of the selection of language). I don't see this as limited. There's surely no more reason to criticise a piece for conveying only this experience than there is to object to a comedy for being nothing except funny (as might be said of Laurel and Hardy, surely the greatest exponents on film) or a tragedy for making its audience weep. Indeed, I wish more of the field still assailed me with dread: these days little besides the darker films of David Lynch achieve it. However, the field is capable of much more, and frequently succeeds – as satire or as comedy (however black), as social comment, as psychological enquiry, and perhaps best of all when it aspires to the awe some, the sense of something larger than can be directly shown. One reason I stay in the field is that I haven't found its boundaries.

NA What story or book are you most proud of writing?

RC At the moment I'm quite taken with *The Grin of the Dark*, but there's never any knowing how long my liking for a recent book of mine will last. I continue to be fond of *Needing Ghosts*, and it may be significant that I'd call them both nightmare comedies. As a collection *Alone with the Horrors* is pretty good, I think.

NA Reading other writers who are establishing themselves as solid up-and-comers, do you occasionally see something that reminds you of your own writing? If so, who?

RC I must admit I'd feel presumptuous to claim that I've influenced anyone. There are certainly writers who say that I have, but I wouldn't assume it without being told.

NA How does it feel to know you have influenced a good number of successful writers?

RC It feels fine, because if I'm anything as a writer, I think I'm a link in a tradition. I've learned from writers as diverse as Lovecraft and M. R. James and Leiber on the one hand, Nabokov and Graham

Greene on the other. I think continuity is very valuable – crucial, even. That isn't to say that great originality is impossible, but it must have a foundation in what precedes it too.

NA If you had three books to offer a twelve-year-old in hopes of converting him or her into a reader, what would the three titles be?

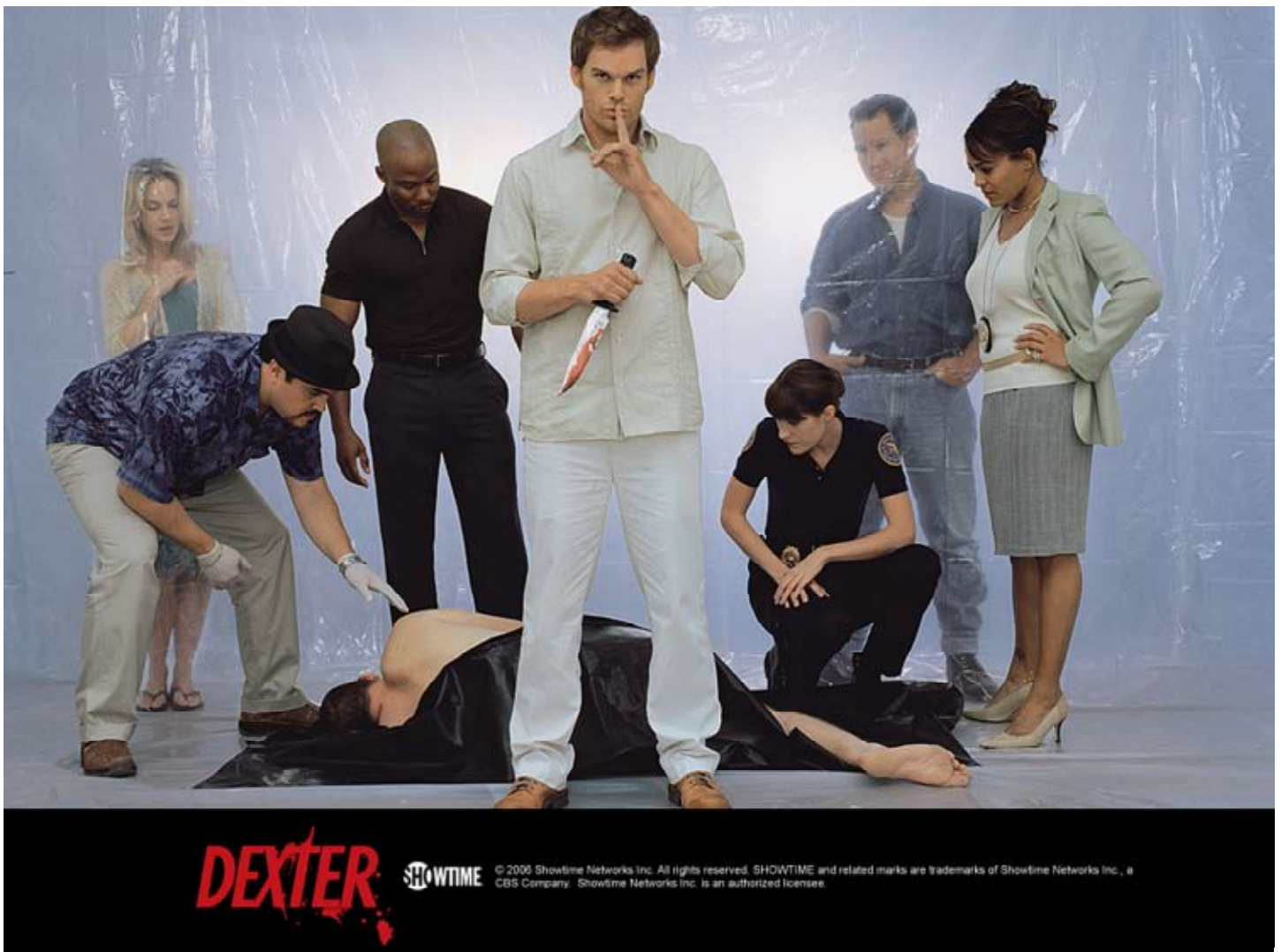
RC Lord! They might never forgive me. I'll suggest Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles (or the title I prefer, The Silver Locusts) and Brighton Rock. They would work for me (well, two did, but then I was already long converted).

NA What is your biggest pet peeve in writing?

RC People who bugger about with my text, especially if they haven't even the courtesy to ask if I agree to changes.

NA What is the best advice you could give someone who thinks he or she is ready to write full time?

RC If you can't make a living doing it – that is, if your writing isn't already earning you a significant income – then it's a crazy idea. Then again, it's one I had after only two published books, and I followed it into the unknown. My wife supported me for years; otherwise I strongly suspect you wouldn't be hearing from me now. Still, writers are crazy, and nothing any other writer says is likely to change them. **NA**





NOTHING TO FEAR

by Paula Guran

Who Are You?

Are you a typical horror reader?

You don't know and no one else does either.

As far as I've been able to discover—and I've been looking for such information for more than a decade—no one has ever done any research into who reads horror.

The fan base for horror films and horror-related gaming is supposedly the legendary 18-34 demographic. I have no idea what the basis for this is, but as those industries do invest in such research, it is probably safe to accept it. Hollywood certainly believes it enough to shape horror films to suit that particular segment of the population.

As much as you might like to think the popularity of horror films somehow correlates to readers—it doesn't. Sure, plenty of you folks love both, but Hollywood has rediscovered that "horror is hot" over and over these last couple of decades and it never warms up book sales.

So, there's no data as to who reads horror.

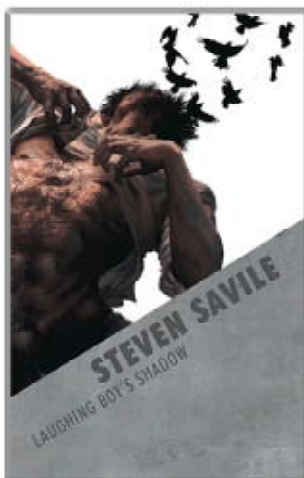
Nor does anyone have any solid idea how many horror titles are published each year let alone how many horror books are sold. Not that it would be an easy thing to determine; no one can define

exactly what horror is. Many books can be seen as BOTH horror and sf or as dark fantasy or maybe as crime fiction or suspense or thrillers or even paranormal romance or urban fantasy or ... whatever. Of

course there are many "literary" horror novels published as "fiction" each year.

And what about huge best-sellers like the Left Behind series? Are they religious fiction or do they

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count as horror? Then there are illustrated narratives and graphic novels...

Locus Magazine once limited its annual count of horror titles to only the supernatural, but even they admit a few non-supernaturals slip in these days. They also include “young adult” novels in their total, except all non-supernatural YA horror novels and those aimed at the pre-teen market are excluded. Oh, and media tie-ins don’t count, either, and a lot of specialty press titles are never sent to them, so they aren’t counted. (Plus, it’s only fair to point out that horror never has been the magazine’s focus.)

If we can’t figure out what it is how do we count it or learn who reads it? Definition, however, is impossible; so let’s pretend we are referring to some sort of fiction that can reasonably be labeled with the H-word.

The Romance Writers of America annually sponsors market research on romance reader demographics and the billion-dollar-a-year romance fiction industry. (Or to be more exact: \$1.37 billion in sales in 2006.) And, although they can’t get an exact count, they at least have a valid approximation of titles released each year—about 6,400 titles in 2006—and can break that number down by subgenre.

And RWA can tell you a great deal about romance readers: More than 64 million Americans read at least one romance novel in 2006, 78% are female, 22% are between the ages of 35-44, 42% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, 8% have read between 21 and 50 books during the year, 31% bought their books from a mass merchandiser ... Well, if you’d like to know lots more about romance readers, visit the Romance Writers of America

Web site (<http://www.rwanational.org>).

(Why don’t other writerly organizations do this? Because they don’t have over 6000 members and cannot afford it.)

Allow me to cite one more RWA-provided statistic: Compared to romance’s billion-plus-dollar sales, science fiction/fantasy generated \$495 million (that works out to about a 7% share of the market). Is horror (with the exception of horror that is “fiction”) part of that genre classification? One has to assume it is.

And, although we are getting no closer to “who” reads horror, we might come up with a decent guess as to horror’s market share. We have to compare apples to kumquats to kiwi fruit and use voodoo math for this and I make no claim as to scientific reasoning but here’s my shot—

We don’t know how many *copies* were sold, but *Locus* counted (for 2006) 271 horror novels, 223 original SF novels, 463 fantasy novels, and 206 “media-related” titles. (It’s important to throw those media tie-ins in as they outsell all other SF by a large margin. Although a few might be horror, most aren’t.) That’s nearly 900 SF/F titles to less than 300 horror titles.

I already admitted this is far from scientific but, for argument’s sake, let’s say there’s three-to-one ratio. Divvy up that 7% and you are looking at less (and my feeling is that is *much* less) than a 2% share of the market for horror.

Or not. Buy into it even somewhat, though, and you might be getting a feel for why horror fiction is vastly unimportant to major American publishers.

Of course, even if we accept my voodoo figures, this tells

us nothing about who reads horror.

Maybe it is better we don’t know. Horror, to be horror, must be unpredictable. If we started profiling who we are, we’d become part of the formula that good horror has to avoid to be good horror. Publishers would probably fall into the same abyss in which Hollywood constantly lurks: following trends and tailoring movies with a certain amount of success then wondering why the product becomes less successful. The “next big thing” will then come along--the “thing”, naturally, is seldom predicted and often unanticipated.

Books aren’t widgets. Calculating what widgets will appeal to the largest number of consumers may have validity, but I’m not sure it works with books. Buying a book is more emotion than science; knowing who the “average horror reader” is adds nothing to the mix of gut-instinct, skill, and art that goes into crafting and publishing a good book.

And, if your concept of what horror literature is as broad as mine is, then you might even be able to say that everyone who reads, reads (at some time or another and, perhaps, more frequently than expected) horror. **NA**





WHAT WAS, WHAT IS, WHAT WILL BE

by Jude-Marie Green

What Was:

These novels were nominated for the Bram Stoker Awards, presented March 21, 2007, for novels published in 2006:

- * Headstone City, Tom Piccirilli (Bantam)
- * Lisey's Story, Stephen King (Scribner)
- * winner
- * Ghost Road Blues, Jonathan Maberry (Pinnacle)
- * Pressure, Jeff Strand (Earthling)
- * Prodigal Blues, Gary A. Braunbeck (Cemetery Dance)

These novels were nominated for the International Horror Guild awards, presented November 1, 2007, for novels published in 2006:

- * The Unblemished, Conrad Williams, (Earthling) *winner
- * The Stolen Child, Keith Donohue, (Doubleday)
- * The Pilo Family Circus, Will Elliot (ABC Books)
- * The Open Curtain,

Brian Evenson, (Coffee House Press)

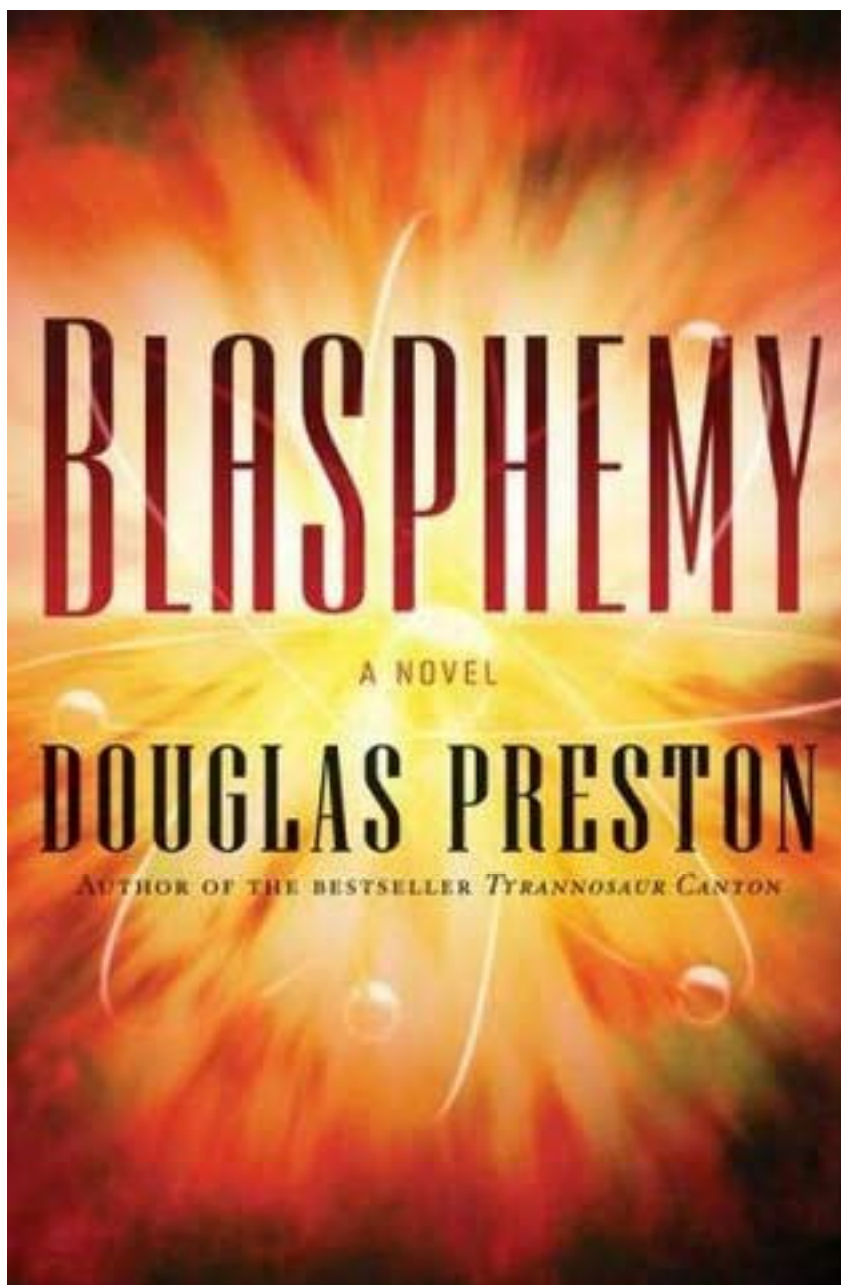
* Lisey's Story, Stephen King, (Scribner)

I loaned my copy of "Lisey's Story" to my son-in-law. Well, I gave it to him. He is a completist when it comes to Stephen King (and Dean Koontz) and had not

yet acquired King's award-winning novel.

I bought this love story on the day it was released (October 24, 2006) and eagerly consumed it. King writes long, and deep, and follows his characters down whatever awful life path his imagination creates for them. Lisey, a Maine housewife married to a multi-talented writer, is used to her almost-invisible position as The Great Man's wife. Yet she is also used to saving him, his soul and his life, from their first date forward. After his death she is called to save him one last time.

The husband, Scott Landon, has another talent besides



writing: he can escape this world and visit another realm. He can take Lisey with him. And this is perhaps where the story is weakest; the price paid for the visits to this other realm are not steep and in fact are quite beneficial to the user, and the visits are quite easy to manage. This fantastical universe-slipping was handled better in "Rose Madder," where the gate was small and the price enormous. Still, this is the main fantastical device of the story. Without her husband's ability—which she somehow also is able to use—this is just the (strong, beautiful, and sad) story of a grieving widow.

What Is:

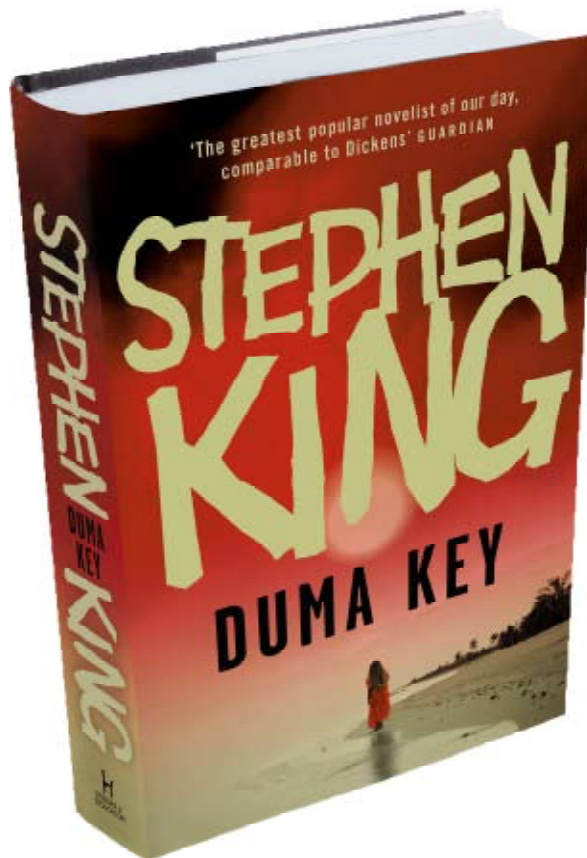
* *Duma Key*, Stephen King, January 22, 2008; Scribner

I have high hopes for King's newest novel, "Duma Key," which is an expansion of a short story, "Memory" (pub July 2006, Tin House Magazine.) Florida seems to be the sexy new setting for horror novels and thrillers. Jeff Lindsay's ironic novels about Dexter are set in Miami, for instance; and Carl Hiaasen also finds the waters in that state are fine. Memory concerns a man vastly injured in an auto accident (reminiscent of "The Dead Zone") and how he copes with the trauma to his mauled body, his shattered memory, and his broken life. Would such an accident cause a man's ethical understanding of death to change from his previous, pre-accident complacency? You bet. King uses this short story as the basis of "Duma Key"'s first chapter, and runs from there. King

says that, as "Lisey's Story" was his novel about marriage, "Duma Key" is his novel about divorce.

* *Blasphemy*, Douglas Preston, January 8, 2008; Forge Press

I first ran across Douglas Preston as one of two authors of the



novel, "Relic." (Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, February 1995, Forge Press.) That romp stir-fried together DNA research, museum politics, nasty monsters, and South American lost tribes. This was followed by several stories following the same characters through New York, Kansas, and New Mexico.

Blasphemy is singularly written by Douglas Preston (who has several novels to his credit) but explores some of the same ground. DNA research, particle accelerators, and Satan combine for what will be an

irresistible read.

I have to admit that the writing suffers from Preston using his characters to advance the plot, rather than concentrating on fleshing out his creations. However, the plot is sufficiently twisted and thus engrossing to make up for the lack of exploration of the profound issues (religion versus science) he brings up.

What Will Be:

For the remainder of the year, what authors will we see? These five were nominated for Best First Novel published in 2006 (Stoker Awards 2007.) Will they give us more?

- * *Ghost Road Blues*, Jonathan Maberry (Pinnacle) *winner
- * *The Keeper*, Sarah Langan (William Morrow)
- * *Bloodstone*, Nate Kenyon (Five Star)
- * *The Harrowing*, Alexandra Sokoloff (St. Martins)

My future columns will concern the small horror press and short fiction anthologies. If you wish to comment, please email me at noctemaeternusmagazine@yahoo.com. **NA**





Rob Zombie

INTERVIEW

NA Have you seen any resistance to your filmmaking career because of your musical background?

RZ I think that it was the case definitely with the first film, and maybe even with the second one until people actually saw it. But I think people responded to the creative aspects of Devils Rejects so strongly, that most studio executives or filmmakers no longer feel that I'm just "dabbling" in their world.

NA With every film you seem more confident. You know what you want to show, how you want to tell your story.

RZ Yeah, you can equate this stuff to anything else. Hopefully you get better each time you do it. You need the experience of doing it.



NA Who inspires you? Artists, authors, filmmakers, etc.

RZ As far as filmmakers go, well, for a film like Rejects it was directors like Scorsese, with Taxi Driver of course. Sam Peckinpah, and all his westerns. Arthur Penn and Don Siegel. People who made violent movies in the 70s were my inspiration.

NA How did you get involved with the remake of Halloween?

- RZ I had a meeting with Bob Weinstein and he mentioned that they own the Halloween franchise and they wanted to do another movie but they didn't know what they wanted to do. They had seven or eight scripts for a Part 9 that they weren't happy with. I really didn't know if I wanted to get involved because I thought the series had run its course. It was kind of tired to me and I wouldn't do a sequel; that would be crazy. But then I went away and thought about it for a long time and I thought that, well, what seems exciting is starting over, bringing a new life to the whole thing rather than continuing on [and] I came up with a way to do it and that was exciting.
- NA So, what exactly is your Halloween then? Half remake, half prequel?
- RZ The one thing I have in common with everyone else is that I am a huge fan of the original so I kept trying to come from the point of view of what would I want to see myself. What would make me happy? What elements would I like to keep and what would I like to see expanded? I had to work out for myself what I thought was the proper thing to do. I just felt, for one thing, I wanted Michael Myers who I felt was the key ingredient to the whole series to be more important, not just be a guy in a mask hiding in the shadows. I wanted him to be more front and center.
- NA Can we expect you back with a Halloween sequel?
- RZ No. I did what I wanted to do. I came in and made a movie, made what I thought was a self-contained film, and now I am walking away. NA





THE SOUND OF HORROR

by Brian J. Hatcher

Audiobook Review

Mister B. Gone

Written by Clive Barker

Performed by Doug Bradley

Published by HarperAudio

This set of six CDs tells the story of Jakabok Botch, a demon from the Ninth Level of Hell, and his adventures in the world above. However, the novel, published around Halloween of last year, is much more. Jakabok (AKA Mister B.) is physically trapped in the book, and he speaks to the reader, to you, as you read it. And Mister B. is watching.

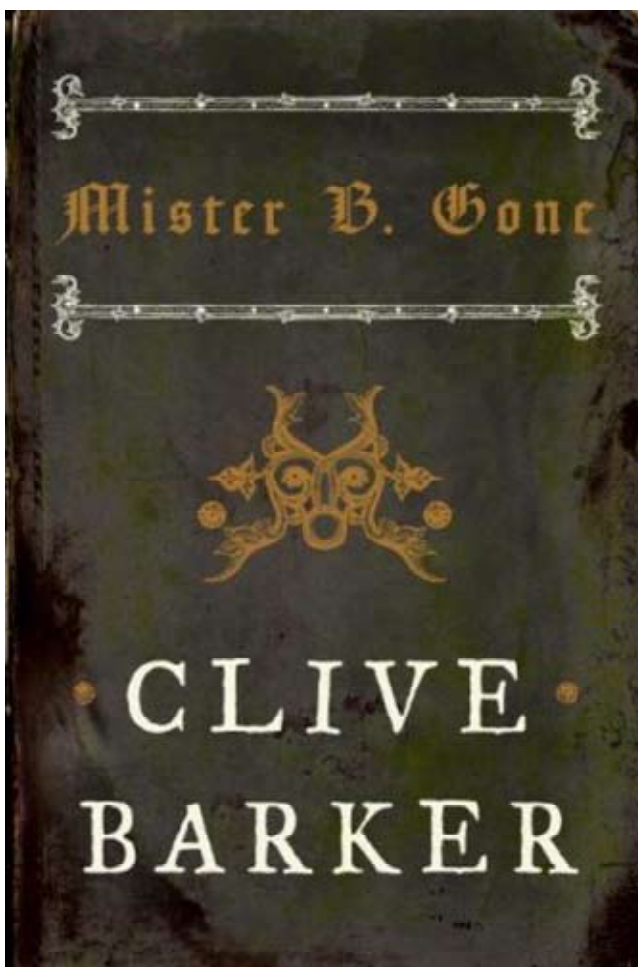
The book itself received mixed reviews. The publishers describe *Mister B. Gone* as “the long-awaited return of Clive Barker, the great master of the macabre, to the classic horror story.” Many readers took this to mean the

novel would be a throwback to Mr. Barker’s visceral, “splatterpunk” days. Although there are horror elements in the book, it isn’t by any means a blood-soaked extreme horror tale. There is a Grimm’s fairy tale feel to the book, with a spattering of gallows humor throughout. It was exactly what I expected, more in line with the type of work Mr. Barker is doing now. Also, he wrote this book during a break from a much darker collection of

short stories he is currently working on: *The Scarlet Gospels*. I went into *Mister B. Gone* without preconceptions, and found it to be an enjoyable, brisk read.

However, I wondered if *Mister B. Gone* would translate well to audio. The book itself is part of the narrative. Jakabok, from inside the book, speaks directly to the reader:

“I’m right here on this page in front of you. I’m staring out of the words right now, moving along the lines as your eyes follow them. You see the blur between the words? That’s me moving. You feel the book shake a little? Come on, don’t be a coward. You felt it. Admit it. Admit it.”



The design of the book, with its worn cover and faded pages, makes it appear very old and very much like a centuries-long prison for a demon. The audiobook would have none of these advantages. However, it does have an advantage that it uses to great benefit: Doug Bradley.

Most horror fans know Mr. Bradley as the actor who brought to life Clive Barker’s most famous character: the Cenobite Pinhead from the *Hellraiser* films. I had

the privilege of seeing Mr. Bradley perform a scene from *The Hellbound Heart* at HorrorFind Weekend 8 in August. This scene is a part of his one-man show "An Evening with Death", which also features his dramatic interpretations of works by William Shakespeare and Ray Bradbury. Mr. Bradley is a wonderful actor with a knack for character. In the audiobook, he brings to life not only Jakabok, but Pappy Gatmuss, Jakabok's abusive demon father, Quintoon Patheea, Jakabok's demon companion on Earth, as well as the rest of the cast of characters. Mr. Bradley is able to create each as a distinctive character, and his skill as a voice actor raises the audiobook almost to the level of a radio play.

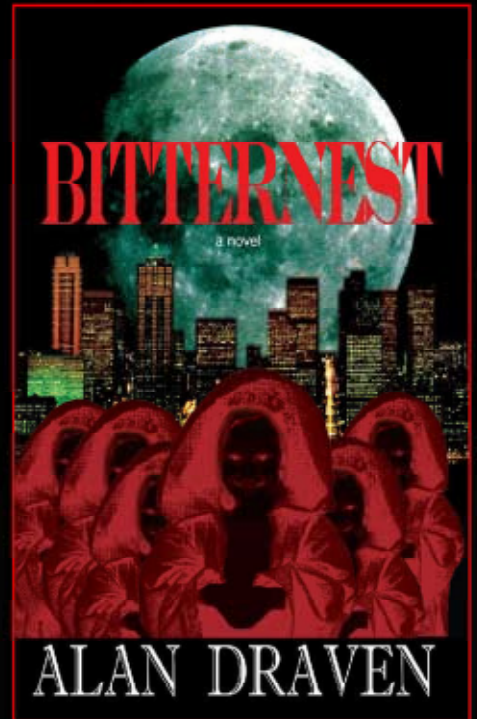
I recommend this audiobook, as well as the novel, with this caveat: in spite of the way Harper Collins chose to market this work, the reader who expects the second coming of *Books of Blood* will be sorely disappointed, as many were. Listeners who enjoy a modern myth well told, a slower pace than the typical modern blockbuster, and horror combined with a sprinkling of dark humor will find much to appreciate in *Mister B. Gone*. NA

Alan Draven's debut horror novel, *BITTERNEST*

"*Bitternest* is a scarily timely tale that beautifully weaves its storylines together in a fast-paced, expertly written manner through the use of short chapters that keep the reader glued to the action and turning the pages as quickly as possible." —*Dread Central*

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A detective forms an uneasy alliance with a group of vampires during a pandemic of avian influenza to prevent a powerful entity from enslaving the fog-shrouded city of Bitternest.

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